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"The woman now and then touching the man on the shoulders as though to guide his steps."

Frontispiece.]

MEG'S MISTAKE

AND

Other Sussex Stories.

BY

MRS. ROBERT O'REILLY,

Author of "The Red House in the Suburbs," "Reed Farm," etc.

With Twenty Illustrations by Fred Barnard.

London:
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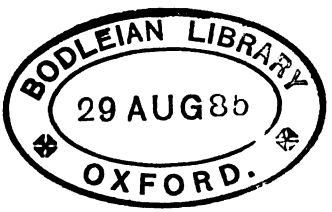

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MEG'S MISTAKE.

I.—THE ROADMAN'S COTTAGE.

"WHAT'S wrong?"

Martin Grey pulled up the horse in the shafts of the light-covered cart, and looked straight before him along the high-road to where a small brown cottage stood beside it.

It was June, and everything was very still with the stillness that comes with the noon hour on a warm summer's day, yet there was something *too* still and silent about the cottage to please Martin, and for a minute or two he could not make out what it was.

True, the house was lonely enough at all times, being the only one in sight just there where the highroad to the coast ran long and straight for a mile or two through the wide landscape, the highest point of which was Silver Hill, crowned by its windmill, even at this distance a landmark for the whole country round, though from this spot it looked very far away, and perhaps only those who

knew just where to look for it would have been able to see it at all.

There is no forest nowadays along this stretch of country, which by-and-by merges into the bleak high lands near the coast,—less trace here than elsewhere in the Weald of the *Wald*, from which it takes its name; yet thickly-wooded tracts in the distance, and the nature of the ground itself, are traces of the extensive forest-lands once reaching from the Sussex Downs almost to the "backbone of Kent,"—that low line of hills lying from east to west, and on which the lights and shadows fall so softly always.

A lonely little house enough this cottage was that had attracted the attention of Martin. The thatch, wherever great patches of stone-crop allowed it to be visible, was dark with age, and, if picturesque, could scarcely have been wholesome; but there was no other sign of neglect about the place, unless it might be reckoned such that the little garden-gate had been left open, and swung back upon its hinges now and then as the summer wind stirred it. The flowers in the small plot within the garden gave token of careful tendance; a fat, contented-looking pig was asleep in the sty in the corner, the house-windows glistened clean and bright in the sunshine, and the door, which like the gate stood wide open, revealed glimpses of a clean red-brick floor, and a deal table as white as soap and water could make it. There did not seem much amiss about the place, and yet Martin, in a puzzled tone, as though the matter were a riddle to him, said again:

"What's wrong?"

He said it to Jack—Jack Grey, whose place was between the shafts, and who owed his name partly to his colour, partly to the fact that he was Martin's horse. There was no one else to speak to; Martin and Jack were

a great deal alone together, and always found each other good company.

"I don't rightly make out what it is," Martin went on; "it is still and silent everywhere, as it mostly is at noon,—you and I have noticed that, Jack."

Jack's ears answered quite intelligibly that they had noticed it, as he obeyed the slight touch of the whip, indicating that the two friends were to proceed upon their way, which they did at a foot-pace.

"Silent mostly as a rule, but the cottage is *too* silent, and that's a fact! Seems asleep like, don't it, old fellow?"

Again Jack's ears answered that it did.

"I'll tell you what it is!" cried Martin, suddenly, and clapping his hand upon his knee in a way that quite startled the old horse. "I see it now! There ain't no smoke coming from the chimney: no smoke, and that just at dinner-time, or thereabouts. No wonder the place looks asleep. It's curious now," Martin went on, "it's curious even if you don't think much of a thing when it *is* there, how quick you are to miss it if it's gone. Meekins must be out at work, and have left Meg out of fuel. We'll look in as we go by, Jack."

Jack seemed to understand that without the accompanying pull upon the rein, for they being now opposite the cottage he stopped at once.

"Meg!"

The cheery tones of Martin's voice broke the noontide silence, and echoing through the little house seemed to fill it, but no answer followed; there was no other sound at all but the creaking of the garden-gate upon its hinges.

"Run out and left the gate open after her," muttered the carrier, leaning forward on his seat in order that the

tilt covering the cart might nowhere impede his view; "yet that's not like Meg, it ain't."

"Little Meg!"

The call this time, instead of being louder than at first, was lower, as though Martin began to feel oppressed by the stillness round him; yet, trying to shake off the impression as he got down from the cart at last and strode up to the house-door, he called loudly on the child's father.

"Meekins, what's up? How is it with you both to-day?"

Still no reply. Everything within the room was neatness itself. If Meg had run out she had done her work first. Save that the hearth, which at this hour of the twenty-four, according to all good household rules, should have been the scene of Meg's culinary labours, was bare and cold, there was nothing wrong at all about the place that Martin could detect. The cottage had no upper storey, its only other room opened from the front kitchen, and the door between the two standing ajar, the carrier pushed it open with his foot, and once more sending his strong voice before him in a shout of "Meekins, what's wrong here, old fellow?" entered.

He saw then what was wrong. More still than the brooding stillness of the hot noon hour out of doors, more silent than the silence over everything there, was the stillness and silence of the figure lying on the bed within the room.

The man must have thrown himself down when he came in from work, for he was dressed in his ordinary clothes; but it needed no examination, hardly needed the touch Martin gave to the cold hand, to assure him that his old friend was dead,—had been dead some hours.

How long the stunned feeling of surprise with which

he stood there lasted, Martin never knew. Only the day before he and Meekins had had a chat together at the cross-roads, where they chanced to meet as the carrier drove home towards evening. Meekins had seemed much as usual then, though he had been ailing, more or less, for years past; but that he should die, be called away from this busy life they two had shared together, struck Martin as so strange and wonderful, that he found it difficult to realise at all. Called away from the old familiar places, away from the lanes and fields, from the quiet days that followed each other here with so few events in them, and where everything was homelike and commonplace,—away, where to? And to what? And if Meekins, why not Martin Grey? Indeed, for the moment it seemed strange that he should be left and his friend taken. In the first startled confusion of his ideas, Martin wondered rather that he himself was still alive, than that Meekins lay dead.

Presently he began to wonder when this had happened, and where Meg could be. Father and child had lived by themselves in the lonely cottage. Years ago Meekins worked on one of the large farms in the neighbourhood, and Martin Grey having been head man on the same farm, it was then the friendship between the two had begun. Latterly, however, Martin had become the owner of an acre or two of land, the produce of which, added to his business as a carrier, enabled him to be his own master. Meantime an accident, followed by a sharp attack of rheumatic fever, having partially crippled Meekins, he had been fortunate enough to be appointed by the trustees of the turnpike-road to look after a length of it; and though the length was a long one, and the walk out and back, when his attention was required at the farthest extremity

of his beat, at times tried him sorely, still the work was such as he could manage, and the pay, added to a trifle of parish help allowed him since his accident, kept him and Meg in comfort. Thus it chanced that the friends had never lost sight of one another. His cart laden with parcels to be dropped here and there upon the way, or having an occasional passenger seated beside him under the tilt, Martin was sure of seeing Meekins at some point or other of the long stretch of road under his care.

Meg minded the house. She had done that ever since her mother's death, that is, ever since it had dawned upon her that her duty and her place were here at home and that the long walks to the far-distant school must be given up.

"Things do get in a dreadful muddle; father ain't not to say comfortable as mother kept him," she said to her friend Martin; "I'm bound to stay at home."

Since the child was already a fair scholar for her tender years, no one made any objection to her plan. Indeed, who was there to object? Not her father when he came home at evening to a clean-swept hearth, and the bright welcome of Meg's cheerful little face. When some careless movement amongst the machinery in use at the farm resulted in an accident that left him maimed for life, and in the long illness through which she nursed him later, Meekins was glad enough to have at hand so womanly and capable a little daughter. Though only a roadman, he had in Meg a treasure many richer men might have envied him, and Meg had in him all the protection, all the home she needed.

And now, what had she? Just nothing. In losing her father Meg had lost everything at once. Where could she be to day, too? Martin puzzled over it more and

more as he and Jack set off again upon the road. A slow man, slow of speech and of thought, this wonder where Meg could be was all the time in a confused way mixed up with that other wondering, where Meekins was himself.

"I don't seem to see it somehow," the carrier said, speaking aloud from that habit of his of making a companion of Jack Grey; "here only yesterday, and accustomed to nothing but jogging along down here like the rest of us, and called away so sudden. I never was pulled up so short in all my life before as I've been pulled up to-day."

Till a turn in the road came at last so that the cottage was out of sight, Martin from time to time looked back at it, leaning out from the cover of the cart in order to do so. The little brown house stood silent and still in the sunshine, and looked just as it had looked before, but for Martin there was a new meaning in the silence.

"It warn't only the smoke," he muttered, "though that do make a difference, and I got to the bottom of it after a bit. I mostly do get to the bottom of things if I consider of 'em long enough. Maybe I shall come to see clearer by-and-by where 'tis as Meekins has gone to, and what's come of Meg,—what *is* to come of her, too, for that's a point as is dark at present."

The turn that hid the cottage had been long left behind, and a little way off amongst the fields, the hamlet was in sight to which the carrier intended to carry the news of the roadman's sudden death, when the figure of Meg herself appeared coming along the road towards him.

She was walking slowly, in no way hurried or excited, and it would have needed blunter wits than even those

of Martin's not to see at once that the child was as yet unconscious of what had that day befallen her.

Questioning her, he learnt her father had sent her early to the village. She started at the same time as he himself set off to his own work. Her errand had been to her old friend the schoolmistress, and it was one that had taken Meg into the village before now.

"What, another letter?" Martin asked.

Meg nodded. Her father had had one brother who was supposed to be making his fortune somewhere in America; but of whom nothing had been heard since first he went there. However, Meekins wrote to him from time to time, or rather the schoolmistress and Meg between them did so for him. Neither Meg's scholarship nor her father's would have been equal to the task alone.

"I were to stay and get my dinner there, too," the child said; "father took his with him; he was going far to-day."

"Ay; he has gone far," observed Martin gravely. "What's come of the letter?"

"I took and posted it, to be sure."

"I wonder what will come of it."

"Nothing won't never come of it," Meg answered with decision. "Nothing never *has* come of it, you know; but father were set on havin' it wrote, and we wrote it very strong this time, we did; oh, very strong indeed,—a-tellin' uncle times was that hard as he never would believe it without he was to come home and see, and father nothin' but a roadman now, and having relief and all, and givin' of the address correct. It pleases father for to have it wrote, but 'tain't to be expected as anything will ever come of it. Nor we don't want for nothin', not when you come to think of it," concluded Meg.

"Father pretty well to-day,—when you left him, leastwise?"

"He were well,—ailing in the night, and very stiff this morning; it's always when he's like that he's so particular to have the letter wrote, but he weren't not to say ill. He didn't say nothin' when you passed him, did he? You must have met him somewheres a goodish bit the other side of home?"

"He didn't say nothing," replied Martin, feeling that question was easily answered, and still pondering how best to break the tidings, and what best to do for Meg when once she knew them.

"Stop a bit!" for the child, giving a friendly pat to Jack's shoulder, was going on, "'tain't no good to hurry; he's not there now."

"I know he could not be there yet," she said.

"He's gone."

"Yes; gone to his work."

"Farther than that. Ay, farther than Silver Hill," remarking how Meg's eyes were turned in the direction of the faint outline of the windmill.

"His road don't lay no farther—nor so far."

"It's the same road as he went on daily,—the road that leads up there, and ever so much farther. If you keep all on along one road, and don't nowheres turn out of the way, why you get to where it leads to at the end, no matter how far that be; from here it seems most to touch the sky, don't it, Meg?"

Martin was puzzling in his own mind how to tell what must be told, feeling, in his blundering way as though he held the right clue now as to where his friend had gone, and why they might be sure that he had gone there, and that if he could but tell it right it would comfort Meg to

hear it, and be a support to her in the shock that must come with his next words.

"Father was a good man: a better man than ever I was myself. He walked along the road daily, Meg."

"He'd got to walk," said the child, eyeing Jack and the cart a little, as though puzzled why it was a better thing to walk than to drive along a road, or why Martin seemed to think so; "he'd got to walk, his work lay by the road-side."

"Just so; daily work, and daily duty; it leads home at last. Home to Heaven,—that's where father's gone, Meg. Get up here alongside of me, and let me tell you what it was I see as I come past your house to-day."

The child obeying him at once in a bewildered way, that showed she had but half taken in or understood the news he had for her, and listening to him afterwards in the same dull stunned manner, as though she found it quite impossible to rouse herself enough to believe the tale he told, and seeming altogether lost, and very unlike the bright little Meg she always had been, Martin soon found he had upon his hands a task he was not equal to. Either the difficulty of it, or the pain Meg's pain caused him, so far sharpened his wits that he got to the bottom of it, as he himself would have said, more readily than was usual with him, and did the very best thing he could for Meg in taking her straight back to her friend the schoolmistress, in whose kind care he left her for the present.

Jack Grey and Martin between them had a good many parcels to deliver, and a good way to go, so that Martin had plenty of time to consider that dark point of Meg's future that had perplexed him earlier in the day, and before the evening shadows lengthened and Jack's nose was

turned towards home, had fully decided it. Calling again at the schoolmistress's door as he went past, he heard that Meg had insisted upon returning to the cottage, and that she was there now. The relieving officer, to whom notice had been given of the death, had sent an old woman with the child, and all would be done for her that was right.

"And what may that be?" asked Martin, stroking Jack with the end of his whip as the cart stood before the schoolhouse door, from the step of which the mistress was speaking to him.

"There's the Union," she said doubtfully, and with a questioning glance at the carrier's honest face.

"There is," answered Martin dryly; "there's the Union,—no matter of doubt upon that 'ere point."

"A letter was sent only to-day to her uncle in America," said the mistress.

"A many letters has been sent to her uncle in America," was Martin's comment.

"Or—a little place might be found for her."

"It had ought to be a very little one," said Martin with a smile, answering the smile upon the face of the mistress, and turning his eyes from the steady contemplation of Jack's ears to meet her eyes raised to his.

"I don't see as there's anything to be done but for me to take Meg home. I've been considerin' of the point all afternoon, and have got to the bottom of it at last."

"There are very few who would do such a thing as that, Mr. Grey," said the schoolmistress, looking, however, not greatly surprised that Martin should think of doing it.

"If it had been the other way now, and a child of

mine—supposin' me to have been a married man, and to have left an orphan child behind me: always supposin' that, just for the sake of argument," began Martin, rather wondering why the schoolmistress, a young woman still, and a pretty one besides, should colour and laugh a little when he said it,—"Supposin' it to have been that way, and Meekins well-to-do, he would have done by me as I and mother will do by him. There ain't no need to hesitate about mother——"

"I know that," the schoolmistress interrupted, smiling still, and yet with something that looked very like tears in her eyes. "I know you have no reason to hesitate because of that."

"That bein' so, I'll just call for Meg as I go past and take her right home at once."

Thus saying, and wishing the schoolmistress good evening, Martin intimated to Jack that it was time to proceed upon their way, and the covered cart drove slowly down the elm-bordered road, the schoolmistress still standing at the door, and continuing to watch it until a turn in the green lane hid it from her sight.

II.—MIXED MOTIVES.

In bringing a friendless child to his own home, and sharing that home with her so readily, Martin, and for that matter, his mother too, had no other idea than that Meg would earn her own living by-and-by. It was her helpless childhood they sought to protect and guard.

"A little place indeed," Mrs. Grey had exclaimed; "I've seen enough of young girls—if you were to say children, you'd be more near the mark—having their backs broke with work beyond their strength. Didn't Dowlass's girl leave here hearty and rosy as a girl could

A many at her age has to work,' remarked Mrs. Bovis."

be, and come back that white and bad-looking as her own mother might have mistook her? And where is she now, I ask you? All along of wringing out heavy sheets, as is a grown woman's work, and other jobs a young thing hasn't strength for. Let me tell you, many another grave over there in the churchyard has been dug with a scrubbing-brush, to say nothing of a heavy wash."

Mrs. Grey was not as silent as her son; possibly his silence was to be in some way accounted for by the loquacious tongue of the old lady. As she stood amongst her bee-hives in the sunny little garden, full of sweet-scented old-fashioned flowers, and, busy all the time with the supers of fine honey she was harvesting, talking to a neighbour across the fence, Meg felt wonderfully interested in the talk, all the more so from being puzzled as to how a grave could be dug by a scrubbing-brush, to say nothing of Mrs. Grey's other startling metaphor.

"Keep her at home till she's come to her strength, and her bones is knit," the old woman went on; "that's what I say. Don't we do as much by the very beasts of the field? A fine thing it would be to put horses in the plough too early, and a little gell is worth as much as a horse any day, to my mind;" with a kind smile at Meg as she placed the honey in her careful hands and bade her carry it to the house.

"A many at her age has to work," remarked the neighbour, looking somewhat enviously after the little figure, as it disappeared through the open door. Mrs. Bovis could not afford to keep all her ten children at home, and was glad enough to find places for the girls as they grew to be Meg's age.

"Places is different," answered Mrs. Grey, "and you're a mother as will be careful always where you lets

'em go. You have ten to think of, you see, and we haven't got but the one."

"It's treating of her like your own," said the other woman.

"What about it? Ain't we took her as such? Where'd be the sense of treating her any otherwise? If you do a thing, do it, I says. I was never one for half-measures; and Meg works for me, you may be sure of that. I ain't a-going to let her work for no one else though, not just yet awhile."

"She ought to be beholden to you, I'm sure. It's to be hoped she'll make it up to you some day. I never heard of such a thing, and Bovis says the same, he do. Strangers to take in a child that way, and save the parish——"

"That for the parish!" Mrs. Grey broke in upon her neighbour's speech. It always made Martin's mother angry to talk to her about the parish. "I pay my poor-rates, Mrs. Bovis, and that's all the parish has to do with me or mine, or ever will have."

"Only Meg *ain't* your'n," muttered Mrs. Bovis, with an uncomfortable consciousness of a weekly two shillings her husband had been in receipt of during an illness, and not daring to remind her neighbour that Meg's own father had partly depended upon parish relief for his support; the very mention of the parish was like showing a red rag to a bull, her friends used to say of Mrs. Grey.

"I hope she's grateful, and will make it up to you," Mrs. Bovis said again, and turned to go just as Meg re-appeared in time to hear the words.

They were words the child heard often enough from almost every one she came across. Not only the neighbours in the village, but the squire's young ladies, when

they came to see Mrs. Grey, said the same thing. The rector, too, and the curate, when he catechised the children at school,—not the school to which Meg had gone long ago, but the one to which she was sent now, in the pretty village that was Martin's home, and more than four miles from the lonely cottage where the roadman had lived and died.

Now and then Meg had been to visit her old friend the schoolmistress in the distant hamlet. It was a great delight to the little girl when, on a fine Saturday, that day being a holiday for the village children, Martin would bid her climb up into the covered cart, and Jack Grey would take the two along the pleasant road, past the little brown house, on to the cross-roads, where Meg would jump down and run up the lane to the school-house, at the door of which Martin would call for her again on his way home. But when even her dear old friend would say to her softly, what a good man the carrier was, and how she should never forget the evening when he told her he meant to take Meg home, and how he did it quite as a matter of course, and with no thought of his own goodness in the matter, and how little Meg ought to try to make it up to him some day, it began to weigh upon the child's mind rather, in what way or at what time it would be possible for her to do so.

A thoughtful little creature always, it would have puzzled her to tell her thoughts when, in those rare drives that she and Martin took together, they came in sight of the roadside cottage. No one asked her to tell them. Martin noticed that the child grew silent always as soon as the familiar little brown house appeared, and that she remained silent until they had gone past and left it behind them. He had thoughts of his own connected

with it, but not being master of any great variety of expressions, merely remarked to Meg every time they reached the spot, just what he had remarked to Jack Grey on the morning of the roadman's death.

"I was never pulled up so short in all my life, as I was pulled up here, little Meg."

"You mean when you found father dead," the child would answer.

"Ay, that is what I do mean."

After that, no more words were ever exchanged between them till the turn in the road—until they reached which Meg would from time to time lean out beyond the tilt to look back—hid the little house; after that the child began to talk again as usual.

This having grown to be quite a habit with them whenever they passed the place in each other's company, Martin was the more surprised when one August evening that he had called for Meg at the schoolhouse, and the two were going home together, instead of being full of chat until they reached the cottage, and lapsing into silence then, she had hardly a word to say to him till the sight of her former home had the unusual effect of loosening her tongue, and she chose the very moments hitherto invariably passed in silence, in which to begin a conversation.

"What was it father done as made you take to him so?" she asked suddenly.

"The best turn as one man *can* do another," said Martin, so much astonished at her speaking at all just then, that he was actually surprised into giving a ready answer.

"But what was it?"

"He were a good man," began Martin, now speaking in his slow puzzled way.

"I know that: you've said it before—you often say it," Meg repeated, with some impatience.

"Well, that were it."

"As how?"

"He were a good man and I weren't; I can't put it no clearer, not if it was ever so; if you don't seem to see it, it must be along of your being a little gell. But you take and consider of it, Meg, and you'll get to the bottom of it at last."

"I should think you might put it clearer," said Meg, twisting herself about. "Was it because of the good turn father done you that you took care of me?"

"Not that in particular," answered Martin, who was more conscious of a wish to follow a good example, and of a feeling of regard for his dead friend, than of any thought of repaying a service rendered to him. "I liked your father very well, Meg."

"I think *you're* good," said Meg, shuffling a little closer to him on the seat.

Martin shook his head at that.

"I don't mind as I ever was very bad," he said, checking Jack's pace to a walk as they went past the cottage. "There was mother and that to keep me steady; but there's a long way between not being bad and being—what your father was ever since I knowed him."

Meg did not speak for a minute or two. She was looking at the little house, trying to catch a glimpse through the half-open door of the room within, the room where her father and she had knelt together morning and evening, and where she had learnt, more from his life than any words of his, what sort of man he was, so that she understood to some extent what it was that Martin meant.

"He learnt you to be a good girl, Meg," the carrier said at last.

"Father didn't never say much," she answered shyly.

"No, he didn't!" exclaimed Martin, with great heartiness; "he never was one for much talk; I always liked that in Meekins. But you see his footsteps along the road he walked."

Meg peered down from the cart almost as though expecting to see literal footprints by the way, though she was used to Martin's favourite metaphor by now, and really did know what he meant. "You see 'em in the bringing up he gave you, and I see 'em, oh, very plain, in that good turn he did me,—the best turn as one man *can* do another."

Martin was apt to repeat his words; having once found the right ones in which to express himself, why be at the trouble to seek others when he only wanted to say the same thing again?

"I'd like to do something for you," said Meg; "you done a heap for me,—schoolmistress said so."

"Is *that* what's troublin' you?" exclaimed the carrier, turning to her with a smile; "I wondered whatever you was after in your own mind. 'One good turn deserves another,' you think. Never you trouble about that. You hadn't ought to, you know."

"Why not?" asked Meg, rather sharply. Every one else seemed to think she ought to trouble herself about it, and she was beginning to think so herself. Martin had no answer ready for her, however; they jogged along in silence for some time, till suddenly, with the old action of clapping his hand upon his knee, so that Jack Grey pricked his ears and quickened his pace, the carrier de-

clared he had considered of it, and got to the bottom of it at last.

"You come in the straight road, child," he said; "I hadn't got to look nowheres for you, out of my own head; there you was, and you had to be done for somehow, and there seemed no one else to do for you. We'd enough and to spare, mother and I, and you had nothing. That was how your father helped me. He never was one to preach or go out of his way to interfere; he just went straight ahead, and, seein' him doin' of it, why, I took by degrees to followin' after. That was the good turn he did me, and if you want particular to do me a good turn too, why, keep on as you are now, Meg; be a good girl to mother and me, and do what comes to hand. You 'ain't no call to go out of the straight road; no one has. Never fear but duty will come along it, right under your feet."

Meg looking only half satisfied, looking, indeed, if the truth must be told, a trifle moody and discontented, Martin, not recognising the discontent for what it was, gave her a sympathising poke with the butt-end of his whip, and bade her cheer up.

"Makes you down-hearted to go past that little house, I know it do," he said; "but don't you trouble about nothing else; no one don't want you to do no good turns, not till a fair chance all in the day's work comes for you to do 'em in."

Meg heaved a sigh, and twisted herself half out of the cart in order to get a last peep from under the awning of the lonely wayside house. To tell the truth, she was thinking with some regret of the independent life she led there. Why should she not do in Martin's home what she had been in the habit of doing for her own father, and so in some sort repay the carrier for his care of her

her? True, the childish longing to serve her friends was very much mixed up with the longing to be her own mistress, but Meg was hardly aware of that. True, too, she was always kept busily employed by Mrs. Grey; but then it was in little things, and under orders, and with the avowed object of teaching her good ways, whereas Meg hardly felt she required to be taught. What with hearing so often that she was bound tc epay the Greys for the trouble and expense they were at on her account, and what with resenting secretly the invariably kind but very decided authority of Martin's mother, no wonder Meg's motives had got rather mixed, and that the more she brooded over it, the less did she clearly discriminate between her honest wish to be of use and her dislike at being under control. Nor did she lack bad advice.

The cottage of the Greys was one in a block of four. The whole block was well and solidly built of stone, and the cottages were by far the most comfortable and respectable in the village. They had one drawback, however; at least it was a drawback in the eyes of Mrs. Grey. Although each little garden was separated by a fence from the adjoining one, so that with regard to their front doors there was a great show of being independent of each other, the airy spacious wash-house at the back ran the whole length of the building without any division whatever, and was common to all the inhabitants alike.

It is true there was a separate sink and tap opposite each kitchen-door, and that the etiquette prevailing amongst the four house-wives forbade their so much as addressing one another, or appearing so much as aware of each other's presence, until one or other had said "Good-morning," and thus shown a wish to enter into conversation; still, what was there to prevent Mrs. Bovis,

who lived in the last division, from calling Meg over to the farthest corner of the wash-house and gossiping with her, if she had a mind to do so?

Poor Mrs. Bovis, worried with the cares of her large family, and envious every time she thought of her own girl, of Meg's good luck, took a spiteful pleasure in reminding the child she was a burden, and had no claim at all to the charity of her protectors; so that it began to weigh upon her that not only was she in no way repaying Martin, but that she was doing him a positive injury.

If Meg had spoken openly to Mrs. Grey, probably very little mischief might have come of the discontented moods the child was beginning to indulge in. But then Mrs. Grey spoke so much herself that there was not much opportunity of speech for any other inmate of Martin's home.

"What are you after now, child?" she said, later that same August evening, as coming into the front kitchen she discovered Meg in the act of removing a heavy saucepan from the fire. "I thought I'd told you to let them large pans alone, and call me when they wanted lifting. The lift of 'em is too heavy for little arms, and there'll be an accident some of these days, before you know where you are. If you want to be doing something, just take and set the tahle; Martin will be ready for supper before supper's ready for him if we don't look sharp."

"I did *everything* for father, saucepans and all," began Meg, a little sulkily, as she moved to obey.

"So you did, to be sure, and perhaps you spread the cloth straight on the table, and didn't leave more than half of it on the floor for folks to catch their feet in," said the old lady, whisking the tablecloth right as she spoke, and looking with a good-humoured twinkle in her eye at

Meg. "I won't say but what you're as handy many ways as a girl need be, only you let heavy saucepans alone in my house, and learn to do as you're bid; that's the first thing a servant *has* to learn, I take it, and just the thing as there was no one to teach you till you come to me. Sancepans indeed! When did you ever so much as see one this size in the brown house? You might put that bit of a cottage in it, thatch and chimney and all, and then have to feel for it at the bottom with a spoon."

Instead of laughing Meg felt quite indignant at this exaggerated statement of the case. She said no more, however, and for a day or two persisted in a dogged sort of way in doing, or attempting to do, everything Mrs. Grey left for a moment undone.

"I can't think what's come over the child," exclaimed the old lady; "whenever she's not at school she's meddling from morning to night."

"She's taken such a fancy to be useful," remarked Martin, a slow smile lighting up all his rugged face, as he reflected he was quite in Meg's confidence; "I'd let her have her way, mother."

"Oh, she may do all she *can* do; I'm no ways against that, and children like to think they're a help—to be sure she *is* a help in many ways; and if it's mischief she does, why that's only natural in a child after all," said Mrs. Grey, with perfect good-humour, though certainly it had been trying to find her best sheets scorched, because Meg *would* put the linen into the copper when by herself, and then had forgotten the copper-stick altogether, even if she had ever known the use of it, which was doubtful. It had been provoking, too, to hear Meg say she had always washed for father. The wash at the roadside cottage

had been a very different affair to that undertaken weekly by Mrs. Grey.

By the time Meg came home from school, however, Mrs. Grey had forgotten the annoyance of the morning, and welcomed the child with the motherly kindness the good woman had never failed to show towards the orphan, from the hour Martin brought her beneath his roof, and with the quick merry words that in the first days of Meg's grief had often cheered the heavy little heart.

Meg was very far from being ungrateful enough not to respond to such kindness. For a time the best of the two motives influencing her childish conduct was uppermost. She went about, burning to render some service to Martin without vexing his mother, and did nothing worse than surreptitiously possess herself of his socks, which she darned in so clumsy a manner that the poor fellow's feet were blistered the next time he wore them, though he was heroic enough to make no complaints, knowing, or guessing rather, to whose meddlesome little fingers he was indebted for his tortures.

III.—A LITTLE PLACE.

About this time a sad trouble befell the carrier. Jack Grey went lame. It was not only that this necessitated the hiring of another horse to take his place for awhile, and was altogether a matter of expense and inconvenience, but Martin having a personal regard for Jack, it was matter for grief as well.

When the carrier, late one evening, so late that his mother and Meg too had begun to feel quite anxious, appeared at last on foot beside his limping friend, there was general consternation in the little household. Jack

knew they felt for him : he rubbed his nose against the shoulder of the old lady and the cheek of Meg, whom he had readily adopted as one of the family, just as from time to time he had rubbed it against the shoulder of Martin as he plodded on beside the cart through the closing in of the atumnal evening. Looking from one to another with quite a concerned expression in his mild intelligent eyes, Jack did his best to say how sorry he was to give trouble, but he really was in great pain and could not help it. At first every one hoped the lameness might pass off in a day or two ; but when it continued, and the veterinary surgeon gave no hopes of a speedy cure, every one was sorry, not so much for Jack, who, turned out in the little field opposite, was as happy as a king, but for Martin himself. Meg in particular began to be very much distressed.

"It will be an expensive job this before we've done with it; what with the doctor, and what with the hire of the horse, and winter before us too," said Mrs. Grey one evening ; "it's right down unlucky."

"So 'tis," assented Martin ; he happened to be looking full at Meg as she sat opposite him at supper, and he wondered to see the child colour scarlet.

"You don't need to be so concerned about the horse," he said ; "my belief is Jack is as content as can be ; so long as he's not put to work he don't suffer no pain to speak of : it's more of a holiday for him than anything else. It's me, not Jack, as it's hard on, for he eats and doesn't work ; his appetite keeps pretty good I must say for him."

Unwittingly Martin was by this speech offering anything but consolation to Meg. He thought the child had a tender heart of her own, as he noticed the look she gave

at her well-filled plate, and that she seemed for a moment quite unable to do justice to Mrs. Grey's good fare. But the old lady was as usual in full tide of talk, and Martin thought no more just then of Meg or of Jack either, and shortly after betook himself to smoke his evening pipe outside.

The next day, while Meg was washing a pile of dishes in the wash-house, and not in the very best of tempers, after a sharp word or two from Mrs. Grey for the manner in which she had begun her work, Mrs. Bovis came out from her door, and began to talk to the child. Notable little housewife for her age as Meg was, some of her ways did not come up to the ideas of Martin's mother, who was doing her very best for the girl in improving her in many little particulars, for which, with childish wilfulness and impatience, Meg was not as grateful as she certainly ought to have been. Mrs. Bovis asked whether the horse was better.

"No, he ain't," said Meg, dropping a tear into a greasy plate, and feeling rather pleased than otherwise to be thus reminded of a woe over which she *might* weep without being accused of temper.

"Ah, it's a terrible expense for Mr. Grey," observed Mrs. Bovis; "and you on his hands too—nothing but a burden to him."

"Am I a burden?"

"Lor', child! how can you be anything else? Three mouths isn't fed with what'll fill two easy."

Meg's own housekeeping had taught her as much as that.

"She won't let me do nothin' for my keep," she said.

"'Cause she don't want nothin' done; Mis' Grey ain't growed helpless. Not but what you could do anythin' as

was wanted, and do it nicely too, havin' kept house for yourself before now,"—how Meg did enjoy hearing that? "My oldest but one was in service before ever she was your age. I know of a little place nigh hand to where she's livin' now."

"Do you?" Meg forgot her dishes in her eagerness to hear all particulars of this place. The conversation that followed lasted so long that it was time for her to go to school before the plates were all washed, but Mrs. Grey only laughed at her, and asked if that was what she called making herself useful. It would be difficult to describe the thoughts of Meg through that day, or to make clear the mood in which she came home at tea-time. But since it is surely not only little village lasses "in their thirteen," as Meg was fond of saying, whose motives are mixed, and who are sometimes the victims of self-deception, it is just possible that the mood of Meg may be better understood by any one kind enough to be interested in her, than it was by Meg herself. Certain it is that she electrified even the loquacious Mrs. Grey into momentary silence by remarking, as she laid down her bag of books and took off her hat:

"Please, I should like to go to service: I've heard of a place."

"Well!" said Mrs. Grey, as soon as she could speak, "if that ain't a grateful speech, I never heard one."

Meg's heart swelled; grateful was exactly what she was under the delusion that she meant to be.

"I don't want to be no burden," she faltered.

"Bless your heart! who's been putting that into your head? It makes no odds to us whether you're here or not."

That this was true in one sense was one of Meg's grievances, though she hardly knew how to say so: she

stood quite silent while Mrs. Grey ran on at great length upon Meg's not knowing what was good for her, ending with a promise of letting her go to service as soon as ever she was old enough and fit for it. Meg considered that both these conditions were fulfilled already, and made it clear that she did so; but the old lady was so decided upon the point of not allowing her to leave home,—the very expression would have surely roused Meg's gratitude had gratitude been the only influence at work,—that she did not so much as ask for any particulars of the place the girl had heard of, but sent her off to the wash-house to finish her neglected morning's work.

Mrs. Bovis was there already. Her mind already misgave her with regard to Meg, and she was curious to hear what had happened.

"She won't let me go," said the child.

It was rather a relief. Ever since the conversation of a few hours previous, Mrs. Bovis had been frightened to remember it, and wished half her words unsaid. Meg was but a slip of a girl after all; what if Mrs. Bovis, a mother of girls herself, should be the means of this child losing a good home, and digging her own grave with a scrubbing brush, as Martin's mother forcibly expressed it?

"She weren't put out, then? maybe it's all for the best. I've been thinkin' 'twould never do for you to quarrel with your best friends, Meg. There's another girl I knows as will be glad to get the place."

"So it's you as has unsettled the child's mind!" exclaimed a voice in the doorway of the Greys' kitchen. Mrs. Grey stood there, and Mrs. Grey was certainly "put out," now, if she had not been before. "It's a neighbourly thing to do, to make mischief with a child like that!"

"Which I'd scorn the haction, and you knows it, Mis'

Grey," answered Mrs. Bovis, in a tone of virtuous indignation, but thinking it best to withdraw at once into her own domain. Once there amongst her unruly half-fed brood of little ones, she was more than ever distressed in her mind as to the result of her talks with Meg, and as to how it would all end. Not a bad woman at heart, she wished over and over again she had never interfered with Meg at all. It was an immense relief to her when she saw the child go and come to and from school as usual, saw her at work in the wash-house, or tripping backwards and forwards from the well; and when a whole week had passed away in this manner, Mrs. Bovis began to hope no harm had been done at all.

But as the autumn days went by, and Meg was taught how to give sugar to the bees in the wooden hives before the door, how to gather the sweet stalks of lavender and lay them out to dry, how to store the apples from the one tree in the garden, and when she was even consulted as to what sort of a warm frock should be provided for her against the coming winter,—all this time she never once relinquished her project, or ceased to petition Martin's mother to allow her to have her own way. Finally, to the consternation of Martin, Mrs. Grey yielded.

"I didn't look to turnin' of her out when I first took her in," the carrier said. "It's along of her lovin' heart, and her not wishing to be a burden, and if it's childish and silly like, we shouldn't be hard enough on her to take her at her word."

"It's along of her wishin' to be her own mistress," replied his mother: "don't you interfere, Martin. What does a man know of little gells? Lor! it would take ten men, as wise as you are, every one on 'em, for to get to the bottom of one little gell!"

"Then it ain't no use my considerin' of it."

"Not a bit of use. The ins and outs of Meg is such as might puzzle a woman, let alone a man, to follow. They don't puzzle me though. I see through her as clear as glass, and I mean she should have a lesson; and Mis' Bovis, I mean she should have a lesson too. Never you trouble your head about it. I'm only doin' by Meekins' girl as I'd do by my own. If Meg was my own she should go."

Meg hardly knew whether to be pleased or frightened when she was sent with a civil message to Mrs. Bovis to ask for all particulars of the place she had mentioned, supposing it was still to be had, or when, all inquiries having been answered apparently to Mrs. Grey's satisfaction, Meg's wardrobe was carefully looked over, a few needful additions made to it, and she was desired to give notice at school that her attendance there was at an end.

Still less did she know whether to be glad or sorry when the day came to leave the roof that had sheltered her orphan head till now. Martin disapproved so entirely of the whole proceeding,—at which he was much upset and troubled,—that he did not offer to take her to her destination in the carrier's cart.

"I brought her home, I ain't nothin' at all to say to taking of her away," he declared; nor would it have suited Meg that he should do so. She wished, and had indeed been desired, to go to her place at evening, and had she gone with Martin, she must have started too early for her purpose. Nor, for some unexplained reason, had she any fancy to spend the intervening hours with her old friend the schoolmistress, which she might easily have done, for her place was in the same village,—that was the only thing of which Meg was quite sure she was glad, the

only point upon which she had no doubt at all. The child set out, therefore, in the middle of the day, upon her long walk of nearly six miles, and carrying her little bundle in her hand: and if ever there was a child who did not understand herself, yet thought she did, or in whose little heart foolishness was bound up, or who, wishing to please another, was so confused and puzzled in her mind through wishing also to be pleased herself, why, that child was Meg that afternoon.

One of the young ladies from the Hall met her at a turning in the lane, and stopped to speak to her: "Why, Meg, you look as though you were going to service!"

"Please, miss, so I am."

"How comes that about? I thought Mrs. Grey wished to keep you with her."

"Times is hard, please, miss," Meg began, "and Jack Grey, he don't get no better."

"Ah! I'm sorry for Jack," said the young lady, quite accustomed to hear this friend of Martin's spoken of by both his names; "but what has that to do with you?"

"I don't wish to be no burden: I wish to help all I can."

"Surely you do that by stopping at home and helping in the house. You might be handy in so many ways, and like a real daughter to good Mrs. Grey; they have been very good to you, little Meg."

"And they have!" said Meg heartily, losing in her eagerness the shyness that tied her tongue at times when talking to the "gentlefolks." "They have been good to me, and I mean to make it up to 'em; not to be a burden on 'em now, when Mrs. Grey she won't let me do nothin' to help, though I've been used to keep a house this long time, and I'll come back by time she's

old and wants some one about her. I might have earned money, miss, by then, and be useful in so many ways."

It was impossible to help smiling at Meg's important face, as she stood there in the autumn sunshine, and was so evidently divided between the pride of going to her first place, and the wish to "make it up to 'em," and looking altogether the picture of a wilful, self-confident, self-deceived little maiden.

"They don't need your money, and, I hope, never will," the young lady said, laughing; "and I think you are making a mistake; still if Mrs. Grey has consented, it is no affair of mine. Run on, Meg, be a good little servant to your mistress, whatever else you are."

"Please, miss, yes," answered Meg, relapsing into orthodox school phraseology and dropping her curtsy.

She went on through the sunshine along the lane where the hedges on either side were beginning to grow bare, and the bright autumn leaves in the woods beyond were falling fast, and the fields were ploughed, and the hop-gardens all "tented plains," which they would continue to resemble until the poles were once more separated in the spring, one pole being set in the midst of every cluster of three young plants, so that the whole country would seem to bristle with spears, as it had done in springtime ever since Meg could remember.

Meg, like all the children in the Weald, dated the events of life from one hop-picking to another, and she wondered now where she should be next picking; thought, too, of many a one gone and past when she and her father had been together.

Once on the long stretch of road that led past the roadman's cottage, the hop-gardens were left behind, and there was nothing but acres of turnips and bare ploughed

land. Meg turned often now to look at Silver Hill, and notice how the windmill was growing fainter and fainter in the hazy autumn light, so that to less accustomed eyes than hers it would hardly have been visible at all. At the brown house the child paused to stand for a moment, looking across the fence. An old woman was busy in the garden.

"Come to see yer old house, have yer?" she said; "'tain't fit for a dog to sleep in, with the roof that rotten, the thatch drops on my bed at night. However did you manage in yer time?"

"It was to have been mended," said Meg doubtfully. She could not remember the thatch dropping on her bed, or remember anything just then that was not to the credit of her old home.

"It ain't been mended, then!" grumbled the woman. "Service, eh?" with a glance at Meg's bundle and at her neat dress. "Time too," she went on; "a great girl like you had ought to get her own livin'. Seems to me it's only old folks as works, and *they* had ought to rest,—should rest, too, if I'd the making of things over again. My back's most broke over these stones, and the more I pick out of the ground the more there be. However did you manage in your time?"

"We throwed them out," said Meg, who had never found the stones a trouble. She thought the garden did not look as she and her father had taken a pride in keeping it, and turned away sad and depressed by the grumbling of the old woman. And then she cheered up, thinking that Mrs. Grey would surely before long be as old as herself, and that she, Meg, would go back, and the young should work while the old rested, and Meg make up to Martin over and over again for all he had done for her.

The sun was setting when she reached her destination, a small shop standing by itself, a little apart from the last houses in the village. One might have been forgiven for imagining at first sight that they dealt in babies there, so many of them were there tumbling about before the door, and blocking up the entrance as Meg stumbled through it. A further inspection of the premises, however, would have revealed wickerwork and cheese, for the owner of the shop made baskets, chairs, and anything that *could* be made from the osiers in the great osier-beds adjoining the village on the side farthest from Silver Hill, and his wife did a private business of her own, in the vain endeavour to "make both ends meet" where the ends were so far apart, the distance between them being increased by a new baby every year, that the task grew more and more hopeless as each hop-picking came round, to use the familiar village calendar.

Certainly it was a "little place" in point of size, but in point of babies, and in point of work to be done, a very large place indeed, as Meg found to her cost. In one respect alone things were to her mind. Her dignity was never hurt by any attempt to teach or train her. Meg's own ways when she "kept house herself" were miracles of neatness and order compared to those of her new mistress; Meg's weak childish arms, Meg's willing spirit, were hailed as a support by the whole family. That the child's powers were taxed beyond her strength, that she was never seen out of doors without a heavy baby in her arms that made her look top-heavy and stagger as she went, that in the house the mere cooking, washing-up, feeding and dressing of children took so much time there was none left even for that scrubbing-brush, the object of Mrs. Grey's aversion; so that in her efforts to keep the

"little place" clean, Meg half broke her heart, and, as she expressed it, was "running after her work all day long, and never come up to it, no, nor nigh to it, before night;" that even those nights were not unbroken, but constantly disturbed by fretful cries, so that the heavy baby was a weight upon Meg's mind all night, as in her arms by day;—that all this was the case, who knew or cared but Meg herself!

Her mistress was content; never had she chanced on such a willing helpful little maid before. The whole family in the short space of a day or two grew fond of Meg, as she well deserved they should be; but it added to her labours, instead of lessening them, that the tribe of children hung about her all day long, and the heavy baby was never happy but in her arms.

Before the week was over, Meg felt very important and useful, proud of herself, that, far from being a burden on her friends, she was valuable to her employers; yet more and more tired out and worried, pining in her secret heart more and more for the quiet comfort of Martin's home, more and more conscious that she was drifting into shiftless untidy ways. She missed the quick merry words of Mrs. Grey; even one of her sharp reproofs would have been welcome. On Saturday night, Meg, fairly worn out in her vain efforts to get the place tidy for the following Sunday, cried herself to sleep, while her mistress laid her own head on the pillow with a feeling of rest and content to which the harassed mother of the large family in Meg's "little place" had long been a stranger. Truly it is the willing horse that bears the burden.

" Never had she chanced on such a willing helpful little maid before."

IV.—HOW MEG MADE IT UP TO MARTIN IN THE END

It was cold weather, worse than cold—damp. A chill November mist was everywhere abroad; one could hardly see more than a few yards before one in the lanes and along the highroad. The bright fire in the grate of the schoolhouse parlour, the pots of scarlet geranium in the window, the table spread for tea, nay, the schoolmistress herself, looked the brighter and the more cheerful for the want of cheerfulness out of doors. The November mist certainly had not penetrated here. There was no touch of it in the pleasant room or in the pleasant face of the schoolmistress. Into the mist, which seemed to have swallowed up all but the back of the tilt, the carrier's cart was disappearing; just as it was engulphed altogether and quite lost to sight, the quick patter of little feet was heard coming in the opposite direction. The schoolmistress, who, heedless of the clinging damp and the raw chilliness of the outer air, had been standing at her open window, closed it at the sound of Meg's footsteps, and went to meet her.

"So they have let you come," she said, "I scarcely thought they would; on Saturday too, such a busy day when one is in service, Meg."

"Were that the cart?" cried Meg, panting from her run, and with no greeting yet for her kind friend. "I did think as I should catch it up. Was it Jack Grey?"

"Jack?" repeated the schoolmistress a little absently. "Why, Meg, his name is Martin!"

The child explaining what it was she meant, and hearing in answer that the schoolmistress really had not

noticed the colour of the horse between the shafts, burst into tears.

"I made sure as *you* would know whether Jack Grey was well again, and if times was not so hard as when I went away, or how they was, and me that tired I ain't got any breath to speak," she sobbed.

Now Meg's tears never had been used to come so readily, neither had Meg's temper in old days been so easy to upset, and yet the schoolmistress did not seem surprised at the child's behaviour, and only drew her into the pleasant room and busied herself in taking off her hat and jacket. Meg was ashamed of herself at once.

"I am that put out and worried," she said in excuse, "through trying to get things straight for Sunday, and through leavin' of 'em in a muddle after all. It's nice to sit down in peace and quiet, and what a blessing you ain't got no baby in the house!"

"I thought you loved babies, Meg."

"And I do. There ain't no one as can do nothin' with ours but me. He's not as happy with his own mother as with me, bless him!" answered Meg enthusiastically; "still it's resting to be without him in one's arms for a bit."

Seeing Meg fall-to so hungrily upon the bread and butter, and eat it with so much relish, the schoolmistress bethought herself to ask whether the child had always enough to eat.

"Bless you! who *should* have enough if I don't?" cried Meg; "why, it's me keeps the larder: I might eat and drink all day if I'd a mind to."

The mistress may have thought that it was plain Meg *had* no mind to do anything of the sort, judging from her pale cheeks, and a certain half-fed hungry look about her, a look characteristic of many little maids in little places,

but one which Meg herself had never worn till now. The mistress may even have had her doubts whether to trust Meg with the larder, seeing what a conscientious Meg it was, was the best way of securing that she had enough to eat, or whether it was not the very way to make her stint herself in the effort to eke out the scanty stores confided to her care. But the mistress said nothing of all this: she only heaped the child's plate with food and refilled her cup.

"I thought Martin Grey would have come and seen me before now," the child observed by-and-by, when tea was over and the two friends were seated cosily before the fire. Meg had been hearing how often the carrier had passed the schoolhouse lately, and never without stopping for a minute at the door: "It's none so far from here on to the village end," she said.

"But it is out of his way, and my door lies in his road. We speak of you always, every time we meet."

"I think he might have come," the child repeated.

"Perhaps—I don't say that it *is* so, Meg, for Mr. Grey never said it himself, but the thought has struck me that he was hurt you should wish to leave his home, that he felt it a little ungrateful of you. If you had spoken to me first about it, I should have told you you were making a mistake, dear Meg."

With the old swelling at her childish heart, the old feeling of being misunderstood, the old misunderstanding of herself, Meg answered tearfully, that it was for his sake she had gone away.

"It makes one better oneself to know people so good as Martin Grey," the schoolmistress went on, looking thoughtfully into the fire as she spoke, and almost seeming to have forgotten the small listener on the opposite

side of the bright hearth; "to watch a life so well spent, so upright and so honest, to know of a heart so good and so true; it helps one to believe that goodness is possible for all, and that there may be more of it in the world than many are apt to fancy."

"Martin told me as it were father made him a good man," remarked Meg, sitting very upright.

"That may be so; I think, indeed, it was so in one sense, for your father was one who loved God, little Meg, and your mother——"

"Did you know mother?" asked the child, finding that the schoolmistress was silent, and had left her speech unfinished.

"A little; we were girls together. It may be as much for your mother's as for your father's sake that Mr. Grey is good to you; or perhaps exactly for the sake of neither, yet owing to the influence of both,—an influence that helped to make him what he is, ever ready to do the good deed lying nearest to his hand, and that with no thought of himself, but a thought only of duty to God and man."

"Did he take to mother same as he did to father, then?"

"He 'took to her,' as you call it, very much," answered the schoolmistress, smiling; "at one time we all thought it was he she would have married, but——"

"She liked father best," concluded Meg, for her friend had once more ceased speaking somewhat abruptly; "I daresay it's along of that as Martin Grey ain't never married all his life."

"All his life! Why, there is plenty of time before him," said the schoolmistress, laughing; "he is not an old man, Meg."

"He's nigh forty," observed Meg gravely.

"For a man that is in the prime of life," answered the schoolmistress, colouring slightly as she stooped forward to stir the coals into a brighter blaze; that done she changed the conversation, and began to question Meg about her place and all she had to do.

From her answers it would appear this little maid was a very important personage in the household, where nothing could go right without her.

"Before I come they had a lot of servants, one after another, as wasn't worth their keep; things is different now," said Meg boastfully.

"And your mistress teaches you good ways?"

"She doesn't teach me nothin'; hasn't no call to it, she says so herself;" Meg's eyes sparkled mischievously as she recalled the teaching of Mrs. Grey.

"You keep everything as nice as you used to keep it in the roadside cottage then? It is a great deal to undertake, for there you had leisure, and only one person to do for."

Meg sighed. She knew things were not as nice as that, or, indeed, nice at all, but untidy and shiftless, do what she might.

"In a large family things *will* get muddled," she explained. She fancied she saw once more the little cottage, with its room so free from dust, and so well-ordered and neat always, and contrasted the picture with the scene of her present labours; she thought with something like a pang of regret of the quiet comfort of Martin's home; "but I ain't no burden now, and I'm making up that way for what he did for me," she said aloud.

"You need not have gone *out* of your road to do that," the schoolmistress said; and the next time she saw the

carrier, if Meg had been there to hear she might have been surprised that the mistress should say, half-smiling, yet half-sadly too, "It is not time yet, Mr. Grey." Meg might have wondered what she meant.

That evening, however, no more was said of Meg's little place, to which it was soon time for her to return; too soon the child thought as she went out into the raw evening air and hurried along the lane. Her feelings were very mixed. Once more, or so she imagined, her gratitude had been mistaken for ingratitude. After the quiteness of the schoolhouse she shrank from the turmoil that still lay between her and her night's rest, and yet was proud to think how useful her mistress found her, and how much she had missed her even during that short absence; so different from Mrs. Grey, who treated Meg like a child, and had said it was no odds whether she were in the house or not! So Meg went back to work harder than ever; to work the harder for the growing sense that her work was quite beyond her powers, and that she never could come up with it, run after it as she might; to work the harder as her mistress grew more and more to depend upon her; and by the time the first snow fell, which that year was very early, for in the first week of December the ground was white, the schoolmistress, watching anxiously for the carrier's cart to pass her door, went out to meet it when it came in sight, and said to Martin earnestly: "It is quite time now, Mr. Grey; it is indeed."

"That bein' so I'll go on there at once," said Martin.

"Not take her home to-day?" exclaimed the schoolmistress, laughing; "what a man you are for doing things out of hand!"

"I've found it the best way of doin' them; when once

you've considered of 'em and got to the bottom of 'em that is," said Martin, slowly; "it's considerin' of 'em as takes time, not doin' of 'em." He was looking at her as he spoke, wondering to see her flush and colour as she so often did; and as for her, she patted Jack, recovered by this time and at work again, and looked as brightly happy as though it were she and not Meg who was to be taken to a pleasant home that very day.

Poor Meg, standing at the shop-door with, of course, the heavy baby in her arms, gave a little cry of surprise and joy when she caught sight of Martin, and then burst into tears. In a wonderfully short space of time, almost before she could believe it true or understand how it had come about, the child was in her old place beside him, and the two jogging along the lane together homewards, leaving the tribe of children staring open-mouthed; leaving Meg's late mistress quite content with the explanation Martin gave of a strong girl coming in Meg's place; leaving the baby crying and stretching out its fat arms to Meg, in such a manner that she really felt it heartless of her to be so glad to go away.

Martin had said hardly anything to Meg beyond asking her if she were ready to come home again, and announcing the fact that the schoolmistress had an eye upon a girl to take her place, and would send her in that night. He seemed to be taking a great deal for granted, and Meg, between shame and happiness, was too shy to speak. She was almost glad that the schoolmistress was not on the look-out for them as they went past her door, though Jack Grey distinctly asked whether he was not to stop as usual, and even Martin seemed disappointed.

"Once in the day is enough, or so it would appear," he remarked, "and not to be wondered at neither; but I

shall miss a word at the door now and again, not havin' you to ask after no more.

"Was that what took you there?" cried Meg grate fully.

"What else should have took me? 'Tain't likely she'd care to be troubled with a slow chap like me now; you were a scholar of hers; she was fond of you always."

"But she *would* like to be troubled with you!" exclaimed Meg; "she thinks a heap of you; she told me so herself."

"Did she now?"—a slow smile stole over his face; "an old fellow like me as is good for nothin' but to drive a cart?"

"She said you were in the prime of life," Meg cried quite eagerly.

They dropped into silence then, but as she looked at him from time to time she noticed that he was smiling still, and rather wondered why.

The silence lasted till out on the highroad, white and silent under the snow, they came in sight of the roadman's cottage, and then Meg began to cry a little, so quietly that for a minute or two the carrier did not observe it, but at last, with much concern, asked what was amiss.

"I hadn't ought to have gone to service," sobbed Meg.

"That's true: and you couldn't get on, could you?"

Meg owned that that also was true.

"I got on there," she said, nodding her head in the direction of the cottage; "I did very well for father, and there's a many my age as does well in service too."

"They *has* to do it," said Martin, so wishful to set matters clearly before the puzzled little mind, that he pulled Jack Grey up, stopping the cart almost before the

door of the little brown house, while he spoke with even more than his usual deliberation; "it comes in their road; if it had come in *yours*, it's my belief you'd have strength given you for to muddle on. Why, you had strength given you here where your duty lay: you did as well for Meekins as heart could wish. It's very plain, child; take and consider of it, and you'll see it clear."

Meg not answering, but gazing at the cottage earnestly, and with a patient humble look upon her face to which it had for long been a stranger, Martin went on again:

"'Tain't only one another as we does right by when we keeps the straight road; it's my belief we meet the Lord there." The carrier put his hand to his hat, and raised it a moment from his head. "'Tain't for me to talk," he added, with a look of greater humility than even that on the face of the child beside him, "not for me as was long learning that 'ere lesson myself, but your father, Meg, it's my belief as he met the Lord daily on the daily road he trod. That was how he did me a good turn, and I told you so one day. He didn't preach nor go out of his way to convert me; he just 'walked with God' hisself, and them as does that preaches a louder sermon nor an archbishop could in a gold pulpit."

Having concluded his speech with this somewhat startling illustration, which did not however startle Meg, but struck her as quite appropriate and well-chosen, the carrier gently touched Jack Grey with the whip, and they went on again.

As they drew nearer home, Meg, feeling a little nervous as to Mrs. Grey's welcome of her, and glancing uneasily at her companion, saw with some surprise that he was smiling again; meeting her glance, Martin, in the old

fashion, gave her a friendly shove with the butt-end of his whip.

"As to doin' of me a good turn," he said, "it's my belief as you've done me one to-day, and never knowed it, for it come along in the day's work, and you hadn't got to go hunting for it nowheres else. It's my belief as you've done me a right-down good turn this very day."

What this good turn was, however, no persuasions of Meg could induce Martin to say; and between her laughing questions, and his parrying of them all, they were both quite merry by the time Jack Grey stood still before the door of the stone cottages.

"You do look bad, child!" Mrs. Grey exclaimed at the first sight of Meg, and welcoming her with a hearty kiss, "but you'll soon pick up again once you're at home. Far's I've ever seen, the cross as is made for us is the one as fits us best, and is easiest like to carry. If the truth was told, now I suspect you found muddlin' on down there heavier to bear than puttin' up with my sharp ways and learnin' to do as you're bid. You look as though *somethin'* had been too heavy for you, and that's a fact."

Meg coloured, but the good woman's tongue was as usual running on again upon some other subject; and though Meg had no doubt now that Martin's mother *had* "seen through her clear as glass," no doubt either as to her own mistaken motives, she never heard another word that could be construed into a reproach, but fell into the old happy ways at once.

In a month or two more, when the winter had passed away, and spring was fully come, Meg learnt what the good turn was she had unconsciously done her friend, for, to her infinite surprise, the carrier one day brought home her old friend the schoolmistress as his wife.

"I never should have seen it clear," he told Meg, "if it hadn't been for what you up and said to me the day I fetched you home. I knowed I was glad to see her always, but that she should be glad to see me was a thing as had never struck me till them words of yours. And yet I'd been considerin', too, why 'twas as she should look so bright and smiling and have such a pretty colour in her cheeks when we was talking to one another. I'd been considerin' of it, but I never should have got to the bottom of it but for you."

There was not a happier family in Sussex than that in the end cottage, fortunately the largest and roomiest house in the row, to which Meg's uncle when he came home that very summer, was directed, and where he found his brother's orphan child. If he had not exactly made a fortune, he was well enough off to be able to repay the Greys in some sort for all they had done for Meg. The only difficulty was how this should be done, for Martin refused all payment, and Meg as firmly declined to leave her friends and go and live with her uncle, who had a wife and children of his own. The matter was at last settled to every one's satisfaction. Two fields adjoined the carrier's little plot of land, and he had long coveted their possession. These fields Meg's uncle bought and made over to Martin, who, with this addition to his small farm, was not only one of the happiest, but one of the most prosperous, men in the village.

Meg's fields—for as hers Martin persisted in regarding them—gave her, he declared, a claim upon the produce of the whole land, so that she could not fancy herself a burden.

So after all Meg had repaid Martin! Had her uncle found her in a "little place," it is not likely anything

would have been heard of the addition to the farm that was quite the making of Martin's fortune. We will leave her then in the carrier's home; leave her being trained in all good ways by Mrs. Grey, so that when Meg really did go to service by-and-by, she was able to take, and, what is more, to keep, a good place; leave her to walk humbly in the appointed path, and finding, as all who do so find always, plenty of daily duties lying ready to her hand, numberless blessings springing up by the roadside, so that when the call comes for little Meg, even if it come as suddenly as to her father, there is good hope that she may be found as he was, ready, and in the right road.

THE BURDEN AND THE BLESSING.

IT was neither snow nor rain, this drizzling from the gray sky hanging like a pall over the whole earth; it was not even honest sleet, for nothing so substantial as a hail-stone mingled with it. Every cottage-door was shut; in most window-panes the glimmer of a light showed already, early in the evening though it was. Far away the low swelling line of hills had been white all day; if snow had not yet fallen in the village it soon would fall; the winter would be a hard one. Had not the hawthorns been red with hips and haws that autumn? were not berries plentiful upon the hollies in the hill wood? and did not the squirrels sit with their tails over their heads? What surer signs of a hard winter would the wisest weather-prophet wish for?

Ralph the woodman had brought home a nest of "sleepers" earlier than he had ever remembered to have found one before, and, indeed, it was high time for any

sensible dormouse to make a "sleeper" of himself, when snow had fallen on the hills. Coming home this evening Ralph thought to himself that he had seldom seen a pleasanter sight than the glimmer of the firelight from his own open door, and the figure of his wife standing there to meet him.

He would not go in yet, however. There was a job or two to see to in the outhouse—wood to cut, roots, that should by rights have been out of the ground and safely stored long ago, to dig up before frost attacked them. Ralph was pottering about there, in spite of the drizzle overhead, for an hour or more after he came home, and seemed to have the village all to himself, for no one was stirring, and night slowly creeping round the place. It was so quiet that the sound of a door hastily shut-to at the farther end of the long straggling street made him start. He rose from stooping over the roots, and stood still to listen to the hurried footsteps that were approaching, and that sounded with unusual distinctness in the silence of everything around. In the fast-increasing darkness, a woman's form became dimly visible over the low garden-hedge. She paused for a moment as though doubtful whether any one were stirring, and peered anxiously through the obscurity, rendered still more obscure by the drooping branches of a large apple-tree which, though at this season almost leafless, helped to conceal Ralph's presence. Either his eyes were accustomed to the waning light, or his wits sharper, for he recognised the woman instantly and asked what was wanting.

"He's out again. I come home from nursing late and found him gone. You ain't seen him up in the wood, have you?" asked the woman, in an anxious hurried voice.

Ralph came down to the garden-hedge to answer her.

"No, I saw nothing of him. But he'll come to no harm; he never does, you know."

"God's hand is over him," the woman said.

"Then go you home, Mrs. Spence. 'Tis a bad night to be out in."

"Worse for him than for me." She had only a shawl over her head, and pulled it closer about her as she spoke; she was getting wet through in spite of it, and shaking with the cold.

"Go home," repeated Ralph; "he'll be of teaching him not to wander as he does?"

"There never was; you know it as well as I do. From the time he was a little chap and first ran alone he's gone off when the fit took him. There isn't a mother in the parish as has took more care of her boy than I of mine."

She spoke loudly, as though defending herself from an accusation, and after a moment's pause, resumed in the same tone:

"Is it because I go out and leave him so much alone that they think I don't do my duty by him?"

"Nay, there's none thinks that," said Ralph.

"The parish think it!" she cried angrily; "the ladies think it! It were throwed in my face the other day, as I had ought to send him to the 'Sylum, and have him took care of there. Would he be happy there?—that's what I ask." She asked it as fiercely as though it were Ralph who had suggested to her to send her idiot son away. "I've done the best I can for him for eighteen year, and for my pains I ain't seen so much as a frown on his face. Would the 'Sylum care whether he frowned or smiled? What's the 'Sylum?" She made an angry gesture that

threw the dripping shawl back from her head, and let the rain beat on it. "Don't talk to me about the 'Sylum. God gave him to his mother, He did, and God's hand is over him. My boy won't come to no harm."

Ralph repeated he was sure of that, and since it was so he begged her again to go home. She shook her head, however, and replied, but more quietly now, that she could have no peace, knowing her boy to be without the shelter of a roof.

"'Tain't often it happens,—you might say as much as that if you was asked,—and on summer nights I won't say that now and again I've not waited patient for daylight, to go and seek him. But a night like this, so bitter cold and wet, it might be the death of him. You don't think—'tain't likely, is it?—as they'd come behind my back and car' him off to the 'Sylum and never say nothing to me about it?"

The mother, a hard-featured, hard-working, ignorant woman, had come closer to the hedge and leant across it, to put that question in a low eager voice, as though fearing some of the parish officers might be within hearing, in the dark and cold and wet of the village street.

"'Tain't likely; that ain't the law," Ralph hastened to assure her.

"Nor that supposin' they found him anywhere about they'd take him then, and not give him up to me when I claimed him? Tell me that ain't likely, either?"

"Bless you, Mrs. Spence, the 'Sylum isn't a prison! Don't you take no such fancies, but come along in and talk it over by our fire, if you won't go back to your own."

"Yes, do," exclaimed Ralph's young wife, whom the sound of voices had long ago attracted to her former post in the open door-way, and who, for some reason best

"A night like this, so bitter cold and wet, it might be the death of him."

known to herself, but which perhaps, every mother would have readily understood, had been trying to make her baby "notice," and when he did so, and laughed back in her face, had covered him with kisses. "Come in to our fire, Mrs. Spence, and have a warm and get dry before you start off after Willie. Did he say nothing to give a notion where he had it in his head to go?"

"I've been nursing up at Green's, and couldn't get away till late; but I do mind, now I come to think, that he spoke of the white hills—he speaks of 'em always when the first snows fall; he speaks of 'em so often, I took him there once, thinking to settle his mind; but it didn't have no such effect—quite otherwise; he said the hills was farther away, that they was far off always, and never in the place where his feet stood,—far off and he must get to 'em some day. But bless you! there wasn't nothing farther off, only the march meadows as flat as my hand, and the flocks of sheep on 'em; nothing but them and the white clouds in the sky. My poor lost boy!"

"And he was talking of the hills this morning?" Ralph asked, reaching past his wife to get down the rough woodman's coat he had put off only an hour ago.

"It's my belief he goes where he can *see* 'em, not away towards 'em where they really lie," said the young mother, again kissing the chubby little fellow in her arms. "Willie's used to seeing 'em from the Hill Wood, or from Silver Hill. He won't go no farther, Mrs. Spence; my Ralph will fetch him home if you'll sit here with me awhile."

True Ralph's supper was ready, and his day's work had been long, but the poor seldom help the poor with kind words or civil speeches, preferring for the most part to

render the special service needed, and that at the very moment it is called for.

"I don't say I feel it right to trouble you," began Mrs. Spence, "but there—I'd do the same myself, if that little lad of yourn——" She broke off, her boy's affliction was shared by no other in the village; no other mother could suffer from the pangs that wrung her heart. "If there was ever anything as I *could* do, I'd do it willing," she said humbly; "and if you was to step up the road a bit towards Silver Hill to-night, while I give a look round nearer home, I'd feel it kind."

She would not come in, but hurried away into the drifting mist, and the night growing quite dark by now, only turning back to impress upon Ralph to say nothing of Willie's absence, should he be questioned by any of the parish officers.

"I doubt they've been plaguing her to part with the lad," the woodman remarked to his wife, as she helped him on with his coat, and set up a candle-end in the lantern. "She was that hot and bitter when she first come up: and without they've been giving her good advice, it's odd she should fancy the parish was wishful to be burdened with a lost boy."

"He'd be well done for."

"No doubt about that; but there's one thing as they make no count on in them places—home love. 'Tain't meat nor drink neither, yet Willie would starve without it. They'd not be troubled with him long, the parish wouldn't."

"There's many thinks it would be a pure blessing for Mrs. Spence to lose him altogether; he's but a burden," observed the young mother, lingering at the open door to watch Ralph off, and holding her infant closer to her to shield him from the cold air rushing in.

"Many a burden brings a blessing with it," answered her husband, as he went out into the darkness, and walked rapidly up the street.

He was not much afraid of harm befalling the lad; his mother's belief that the hand of God was over the innocent was shared by all the village, and if that all-sufficient protection were his, a little cold and wet would not be allowed to hurt him. Still this was hardly a night for any to be out in who had a roof waiting to shelter them at home, and, indeed, whenever Willie wandered, there were few amongst the neighbours who would have hesitated to render the widow the service Ralph had just undertaken.

As a rule the idiot boy kept near home. The shambling figure with its uncertain step and bent shoulders was a familiar one along the lanes, or up in the Hill Wood, or pacing restlessly for hours together, as he sometimes would do, in and out of his mother's door, with apparently no aim or object, and yet trying to express in his almost unintelligible speech that he had forgotten something, or was seeking something, no one knew which. Willie's speech always was almost unintelligible to every one but his mother, from which resulted that he was very silent with every one but her. With children he made himself understood easily enough, by means of smiles, and nods, and signs; and as the children of the village were good to him, and he fond of their company, he was seldom alone, and his mother's heart was at rest about him when she was out nursing. At other times, when at work in the fields, it was easy to keep him near, and have her eye upon him constantly.

That he was a care to her there was no disputing. Willie had been that since the first days after his father's death, when it had begun to dawn upon the widow that

her baby was not like others; when he had only vacant looks where other children smiled; when he was so late in "taking notice," later still in speaking, or rather in uttering the strange uncouth sounds that come at last, instead of broken words or infant prattle. And that he would need her care all his life, be helpless and dependent always, and never able to work for her as she now worked for him, there was no disputing that either. And yet the burden *had* brought a blessing.

You saw it in the peace and serenity of Willie's looks, so different from those of the well-fed, well-cared-for fellow-sufferers of his in the Asylum, where in the very nature of things and with the best intention in the world, home love not being, as Ralph truly remarked, either meat or drink, could not be taken into account, or provided on any esitmate at so much per head. You saw it plainer still in the unselfish life of the mother, toiling day by day, with not even the reward that other mothers had; with only the reward if her "lost" boy's smile, and the certainty that if he knew no one else, he knew her always; if no one else could understand him, she could at all times do so; and the pride she took in the fact that if Willie had not his senses there were none in the village better nourished or more warmly clad than he.

The greatest trouble she had was in these wandering fits that would from time to time come over the lad. Even when he had been a very little fellow, his mother might have been seen now and then, after a long day's work, hurrying up the village just when other housewives were sitting down to rest, and families gathering together for the evening hour. On such occasions the neighbours knew Willie Spence was off again, and looked after the widow anxiously; but, since she had never failed in find-

ing him before long, now in the Hill Wood amongst the hazel copses, now on the very topmost step of the mill ladder on Silver Hill, shouting aloud, and flinging up his arms towards the sky, now walking, or rather shambling along the road, far from home, and muttering to himself in a way his mother understood to mean he was bent on going to some place, where, she never knew, and on reaching that place before it was too late to get in; as somewhere or other, she never failed to find and bring him home, and as moreover these wanderings of his were rare even in his childhood, and grew less frequent still in later years, neither the neighbours nor the widow herself felt much anxiety upon Willie's account, until a new fear took possesssion of her, and she began to dread for her boy a new danger.

Times had been hard in the spring of that year. The widow had not only earned less than usual, but had been ill for a long six weeks, during which Willie, far from wandering or in any way giving trouble, had scarcely moved from the bedside, excepting when coaxed away by the children. He had sat looking at his mother in a puzzled way, now and then urging her to rise, trying even to drag her from her bed, but easily quieted, as he always was, by her voice. He was put out, she said, to see her ill. Willie was full of thought: who should know it if his mother did not?

"What puts other folks out does the same to him; it's my belief as everything is the same to him as 'tis to us, only he's dumb like. 'Tain't his feelings nor his heart as is different, only he's no sense to say what he means," she insisted always.

During her illness a neighbour looked in and did for her just as she had done for many a neighbour in her

turn. The ladies came to visit her, too, and brought little messes of beef-tea and broth. They questioned her about Willie.

"Yes, he had always been like that—for eighteen years now. Did she feel it hard? Well, it was hard for him, to be sure, but while he had his mother he wanted for nothing, and was happy always, Willie was. Oh yes, he understood her very well. Teach him his prayers? To be sure, why not? He knew very well when she spoke of heaven what it was she meant; was it likely he wouldn't when such as him were called 'God's children;' 'twas a name given to them everywhere, and whether Willie said his prayers or not, what did it matter, seeing how he was innocent, and didn't so much as know right from wrong?"

And then the ladies spoke to her of the Asylum, and told how Willie would be well cared for there, perhaps even taught some simple trade, and be of use in the world instead of a burden only.

The sick woman turned uneasily in her bed.

"Who is it says he's nothing but a burden?" she asked. "I'm not one to deny as children bring care with them, and with my Willie it's just as though he was a child all his life. But he ain't no more of a care now than when he was a babe in my arms."

Well, if she would take such an absurd view of things, there was of course no more to be said. The ladies went away, leaving little delicacies behind them, most of which went down Willie's throat. His mother was too glad to have nice things to give him. As for her, she lay there in the small upper room and got well as best she might, anxious only to be up and about again for Willie's sake, that she might earn food and clothing for him before the

winter overtook them, and not, as has been said, uncared for by her poorer neighbours, who understood her better than the ladies did, and felt no surprise that she would not part with her boy. "Not to none but the Lord Himself; if He were to call Willie away, it would be only a blessing," they agreed.

Later in the year, when the hop-picking, on which the widow had counted to make up for her enforced idleness, proved a failure, and the hops, so bad as not to be worth the expense of gathering, hung rotting on the bine, she found herself, for the first time in her life, compelled to apply to the parish for relief.

She was met at once by the suggestion of placing her son in the Asylum; she would then not merely have one instead of two to work for, but would ensure his being better done by than could be possible at home, they told her. It might have been all very well while she was strong and able to work for both, but when it came to asking for relief it was clearly her duty to send Willie from her.

"What good would my life be to me without him?" the mother exclaimed, when repeating to a neighbour the advice that had been given her. She would not listen to it for a moment. Either in field-work through all weathers, or an occasional job of sick-nursing, for which the poorest amongst her neighbours were often glad to secure her services, she would work for Willie as she always had done, summer and winter, in good times and bad, for these long eighteen years.

"Time enough to part when the Lord parts us," she said.

Truly the burden in this case was felt to be too much of a blessing to be lightly cast aside.

But when this advice grew to be oftener and oftener repeated, now by the clergyman, now by the benevolent ladies, who began to interest themselves greatly in Willie and his mother, and always by the relieving officer whenever she came across him, it had the strange effect of rousing in the widow an angry feeling against these friends of hers, whom, in her dread of being parted from her boy, she began to look upon in the light of natural enemies.

"Fine talking!" she said to Ralph; "the ladies and them seem to think they can fix things better than the Lord who gave me my poor boy. Willie may be a bit 'lost,' but he's my own. Let them go the 'Sylum who ain't got no mother."

"They mean it kind," answered Ralph. He understood better than the widow did what sad need there was in the land of such buildings as that, at which she used to shake her fist angrily now whenever she looked towards it, standing on the far-off hillside, miles away from the village. "They mean it kind, and it ain't every one as can get an order."

The ladies owned that if Mrs. Spence was too ignorant to understand good advice when it was offered her, much less to take it, there was something touching in her affection for Willie. But how provoking that it was impossible to make her see the extent of the boon they offered, or even that it was a boon at all!

Too ignorant to recognise the blessing of charitable institutions that separated mother and child, so ignorant as to look upon them in the light of prisons, and shake her fist at them, so ignorant as to believe that advice from a parish official must of necessity be in some mysterious way backed by authority, powerful enough to oblige

her to follow it, and living on that account in constant fear, the widow was wise only in her love for Willie.

Ralph had not much difficulty in finding the lad on that particular evening, none at all in persuading him to come home with him; Willie was docile at all times, and easily led. Possibly from having never known anything but kindness, he had none of the malicious ways that frequently make those afflicted as he was an additional trial to their friends. What he had been about, or why he should have been overtaken with his bent head, more bent than usual to avoid the drifting rain, patiently shambling along the road that passed Silver Hill and led away towards the downs, Ralph could not pretend to make out from the flow of "gibberish," as he called it, that fell from the "lost" lad's lips. His mother, however, seemed to understand him. When they met her close to Ralph's own gate, and when—she with her hand on the boy's elbow, the fashion in which the two always walked together—they passed away into the night, Ralph stood still till their voices were no longer audible, wondering to himself at the words that met his ear.

"To be sure: you'll win there some day yet," the mother was saying; "but we must come home first to the warm fire."

"Not cold there! oh, but it is; it's cold always on the white hills, Willie."

The replies of the idiot boy were unintelligible to Ralph, though the harsh guttural sounds were loud enough.

"Shut you out? no, dear, they'll not do that. You'll be in time, too, never fear; only we must get home first," the mother said again, and then Ralph heard no more.

He stood listening till the bang of the house-door told him the widow and her boy were safely in shelter, and then turned into his own cottage and his long-deferred evening meal.

"I wonder where 'tis lost Willie wants to win," Ralph remarked thoughtfully; "Mrs. Spence, she seems to understand him; I don't."

"She's his mother," answered Ralph's wife simply; "besides, she never knows what place 'tis he speaks of. she told me that herself; only 'tis a good place. I think by times, Ralph, that p'r'aps it's heaven."

"Did you hear tell how one of the ladies declared 'twas the Asylum?" asked Ralph, throwing back his head with a laugh.

It was true that this luminous idea had suggested itself to one of the kind friends bent upon serving the widow in spite of herself, bent upon ridding her of a burden, and having no suspicion that a blessing might be withdrawn from her with it.

"I have told Willie so much about the Asylum," this lady once observed; "you say he understands what is said to him?"

"Ay, he understands; Willie is cleverer than you think."

"Then doesn't it strike you it may be there he wants to go?"

"No, it don't," answered the widow shortly.

Meantime, though the boy himself did not seem in any way to have suffered from exposure to the damp and cold, they had brought to his mother a return of illness. The snow fell at last, not only on the distant hills, but in the village street; the hard winter had fairly set in, the widow's scanty savings were gone. To keep a fire in the

grate for Willie, who, like all idiots, suffered greatly from cold, to give him the food he needed, it was necessary to apply once more to the parish. And now the question was raised in good earnest as to whether this was a case for out-door relief, or whether Widow Spence and her son ought not to go into the House.

They would have gone anywhere, if only they could have gone together.

Ralph's little wife was so distressed for her neighbour, that the woodman actually went up before the Board to speak his mind, and put it before the gentlemen that out-door relief would save the little home instead of breaking it up, and that if ever there was a case for it this was one.

Every one else interested in the case, however, declared that it was an opportunity not to be lost for getting Willie properly cared for, and looked after at last. His mother would be willing to part with him for awhile, and once she saw how well he would be cared for, and the improvement there would be in him, would be willing he should remain there entirely. So the old persecution—for it was nothing less—began, and with every intention of being good to her and acting for the best, the clergyman, the benevolent ladies, and the parish between them, relieved the widow of the burden she had borne for so long.

Willie went willingly enough. So wise for him, so ignorant in much else, his mother had called him to her bedside and made it clear to him that he was to "get in" at last; that the time was come to go to that place he always was trying to reach, and she was coming soon. He went away smiling. She never had seen a frown on his face yet, and no words of hers should ever bring one. For herself, she remained where she was. So little would suffice for her own wants, and thus she would

keep a home for Willie and have him back with her when spring came, and she was able to work again. It would be worse, she said, to be under the same roof with him and not allowed to see him ; he in the male paupers' ward, she in the women's ward. She could not bear it, she was sure of that. If it was the law it was a cruel one. "Had not Mrs. Dowlish clung to her man when the whole family of them was took in, and made that fuss that the very parish officers were scared for once?"

In vain the benevolent ladies entered into explanations. Where was the use of talking political economy, even in its simplest form, to this ignorant woman?

She was glad it was to the House, and not to the County Asylum, Willie was to go ; she could get him out easier, she thought ; and then, with the dumb patient submission of the poor to anything they once recognise as inevitable, Willie's mother said no more, but turned her face to the wall.

It was to the Asylum they took the lad, however. The clergyman himself came to the cottage and explained it to the mother, drawing such a picture of the comforts surrounding Willie now, that, looking round on the bare walls and thinking of the empty woodbin, and the slender means of refilling it she possessed, the widow owned with a sigh that the lad was better off than if he had been left with her.

By-and-bye she recovered strength enough to go out nursing now and then. She never had been so glad to go before ; it was dull and silent indoors. Odd jobs of rough needlework were given to her readily ; she was too unskilful for any but the roughest sort, still, before Christmas drew near, she was, or might have been rather, in a fair way of doing well.

But from the hour that they had taken Willie from her the widow was no longer the same woman. Perhaps the wish to have him back was not so strong an incentive to honest industry as the wish to keep him with her had ever been; certainly it did not influence her as the sight of Willie, helpless and quite dependent upon her, had done all his life. Her very appearance changed for the worse. Complaints arose that when out nursing she would fall asleep and be hard to wake when wanted, and her neighbours attributed this bad habit, which never used to be hers, to the black bottle she brought with her now to their bedsides, and which she never used to bring there in old times, having been always looked upon as a sober as well as an industrious woman. They asked her when she would go and see the lad, but she only answered:

"My heart's sore and empty without him; if so be I saw his face I'd be wanting to have him home, and it might but unsettle him for to see mine. I've done the best I could for him always, and if the best was to let him go, why I've done that too. It's hard living here in the winter, and bitter cold; if Willie sits warm by the fire's side I'll not be the one to have him back, and if I was to see him I'd be fain to take him away with me."

"I doubt they made a mistake there," Ralph the woodman said, as he watched the slatternly figure, that had been trim and tidy once, on its way up the village street. "I doubt it would have been a kinder thing to hold out a hand and help her bear the burden in place of taking it off her shoulders altogether. They've took the blessing off with it, it seems to me."

"She be going to the old place," remarked a neighbouring gossip, straining her neck to follow the widow with her eyes.

"'Tis a *new* place to her," answered Ralph sharply; "she never was used to go there in old days; she's a hard-working woman still. I hear she was nursing Green last night."

"He died at midnight," put in another woman standing by; "she come for me to help her; she's not the woman she was, as could do her work by herself;" and the speaker threw back her head and raised her hand to her lips, a significant gesture, that made the other woman shake her head; and Ralph turned away rather indignantly, and left them to have their gossip out without him.

And Willie? To an unobservant eye he might have seemed as contented as the rest of the inmates of that large house on the hillside, but the matron said he pined, and certainly the "lost" look on his face was more apparent than it ever had been.

"He is not a case for us," the matron said; "they never are by rights, when they have those that love them living."

She was a kindly woman, and good to all the poor creatures under her care: very good to Willie, who however must take his chance with the rest, and who, docile as he ever had been, did not seem to benefit by the training bestowed upon him, but grew more and more restless every day. The wandering fit was on him again, —on him more strongly than in all his life before, when he had been able to satisfy it, for a little while, whenever it overtook him. Now that he could not get out it made him wretched. He began to watch for opportunities of escape; or if not that, to seize upon them so readily that he became accused of watching for them. An open door, never mind where it led to, grew to be an irresistible

"The lad pushed his way in, and caught hold of her dress."

attraction to him, and, on New Year's Day, though how he had contrived to get away no one ever knew, the shambling figure showed itself once more to the astonished eyes of the neighbours in the village street.

The snow lay thickly everywhere then: not only the distant hills, but the whole world was white. Willie stood shivering at his mother's door; it was open, but no fire burnt on the hearth, and no one was in the cottage.

Muttering to himself in the old fashion, and in the old fashion turning his head from side to side, Willie set off to find his mother. The neighbours looked after him, but followed the advice of Ralph and left the lost lad to himself. Up in the village where he had never found her before, Willie found his mother that day—at the bar of the public-house. Catching sight of her through the open door, the lad pushed his way in, and caught hold of her dress.

"Willie! Willie! Willie!"

His name repeated over and over again was all she had sense to say, but the two went out together and through the snowy street back to the cottage, the widow not now as of old guiding her boy, but he clinging to her dress and dragging her along with him, talking fast as he went. He was making no complaint, only trying to tell her it was all wrong, the Asylum was not the place he wished to reach, it was far off still, Willie must get there some day, and before it was too late, for fear they shut him out, and his mother must come too.

Whether in her confused state it struck her that there was danger of her being shut out of the good place Willie strove so hard to reach, and whether it was some such thought as that that seemed to startle her and make her hurry now to go with him, who can say? She was an

ignorant woman, you see, and perhaps the idiot boy had been her best teacher. Certainly from him, or her devotion to him, she had learned lessons of unselfish love that might have glorified any life; certainly without him she had been all astray.

Shivering with cold, his teeth chattering in his head, the boy led his mother into the empty house, and sat down patiently before the empty grate, waiting in full confidence that she would warm and comfort him as of old. She had sense enough to do that, and to dress food for him, and make him eat; sense enough to know he was there, and to feel her hungry heart satisfied with the sight of him, and by-and-by as the day wore on, and she grew quite herself, to feel ashamed of the state in which Willie had found her, to make up her mind that, with him to see to, it never should be so with her again.

Later, when they came to seek for him and fetch him back, the widow shut the door in their faces.

"Take him back! what, to let him lose himself again and be starved with cold? I'll never part with the lad more!" she said, in the old fierce way.

So ignorantly ungrateful for all that had been done for Willie! so impossible to make her understand that a favour had been conferred upon her, for which she was at least bound to be thankful!

However, since, as Ralph once asserted, the Asylum is no prison, and moreover, since the matron had been heard to say: "If he comes back to us he will die," and since, though last, by no means least, his mother had it in her power to keep him without assistance, no one interfered with Willie any more. Mother and son are together still. Working late and early, summer and winter, watching her boy with the old care and love, the widow

is once more sober and industrious, and has even contrived to lay by a little sum to which she adds from time to time, and which she looks upon as her best defence against those who may ever seek to part her from her "lost" lad.

Nor is she without a sense of repentance, which, whenever Willie speaks of that good place he hopes to win to, is stronger upon her than at any other time. For the innocent fancy had gained ground in all the village that that place is heaven, nor does it do Willie's many friends any harm to believe it. He wanders seldom now, less and less frequently as the years go by, and every day his mother gives thanks to God for the blessing of her life; neither do any dare say again that the idiot lad is but a burden.

THE LITTLE BLUE BAND-BOX

IN the woodland the primroses were just beginning to show amongst the moss, and though the wind flowers might wait another week or two before their graceful heads swayed to and fro in wild March breezes, the feathery green leaves already betrayed where they also would blossom in profusion, and rejoice in the freer air and unintercepted sunbeams now that the underwood was cleared.

The copse was nearly all underwood, and fell in its turn, once in seven years, before the woodman's axe, as the tall straight larch and ash stems became fit for hop-poles. Still here and there an oak maintained its ground, growing the stronger and the straighter for the downfall of its comrades, or a beech was left to stretch forth its branches and make a pleasant shade in the little wood. One crooked ash, too, that always from its youth up *had* been crooked, so bent and twisted from its earliest years as to be of no use as a pole, had for that reason escaped the axe, and had stood year after year, in the corner

opposite the turnpike-gate house, for so many years now that its trunk had attained an unusual girth, and no one knew how old it was. Each autumn it dropped its bunches of keys into the eager hands of children on their way to school; each spring its black buds were a noticeable feature of the copse, and showed strikingly amongst the tender beech-leaves and the delicate tints of the young larch.

Jasper, who kept the turnpike, was as old as the ash, or so the children considered; while many of their elders had known him all their lives, just as they had known the tree whose twisted branches overhung the white post in the hedge opposite the gate-house, so that the place would have seemed unlike itself with either of them absent from it.

"It's pretty certain I shall be the first to go," Jasper said, looking up at the net-work of budding branches traced against the blue sky: "that's certain at anyhow, and nothin' else is to be expected; but that the gate itself should go———" The old man shook his head.

"A good riddance, too; they're going everywhere, I hear."

The speaker, who was the principal butcher in the neighbourhood, albeit he was a young man still, and had but lately started in business for himself, probably found it inconvenient to be stopped on his rounds in order to pay the customary toll, for which he was fumbling now in the leathern purse he carried. "The gate will last your time, Master Jasper, and I for one am glad to think so; we should miss you most as much as the old tree itself. But taking the gate *as* a gate, and nothing else, the sooner it's gone the better; they're going everywhere."

"Them as uses the road should pay for it; can't see no further than that," said the old man.

"So they ought, and so they will. A road rate will give us better roads than we have now, and not fall so hard as the tolls, which are high hereabouts—you must own that, old gentleman—to say nothing of there being more gates within a circle of five miles or so than a man can count."

"You can't get good roads cheap on clay land, where the stone is so deep as it costës a sight of money for to get it out, and no road rate won't help you neither," said Jasper; "if you've a mind to have no tolls, why, *that's* what you'll come to, same as the parish roads, nowadays;" he pointed along the lane towards the village, the lane through which the butcher had just driven, and which at that spot intersected the highway, and was mended—though the mending only made bad worse—with round pebbly stones brought from the seashore. This rubbish neither could nor would blend with the soil, all stiff clay after wet weather, or shifting dust in a long spell of drought, and only rendered the lanes so heavy that the butcher had often declared the wear and tear of springs, to say nothing of horseflesh, made his heart ache. He shook his head now as his light cart rattled down the long hill, on the brow of which the turnpike was situated. A patient yoke of oxen were toiling up the hill; strangers wondered to see oxen used in that neighbourhood, but the waggon-wheels sinking in the clayey soil might have sufficiently accounted for the custom.

"Seems to me folks have a way of expectin' things where they 'ain't no right to look for 'em," Jasper said to himself; "there's them as would like *you* to bear acorns old friend," with a glance at the tree opposite.

"'Who should know him if I don't?' answered Jasper."

It was early in the year, but at that hour the sunbeams fell warm upon the little bench before the door, and Jasper was in no hurry to move until the heavy timber-waggon had come to a stand at the hill-top; when it did so he became aware of two figures, which, having ascended the hill behind it, had hitherto been invisible. They were the figures of a young man and of a girl wearing a scarlet cloak, which made a pretty bit of colour in the sylvan scene. Jasper gave a low laugh.

"Seemed like as if the beasts was coming up by themselves, Tom; I wondered where you was got to. Is that for the timber-yard? It's the beech from Mum's Pumps, ain't it?"

"I do believe you know every tree in the country, Master Jasper!" exclaimed the girl, as though rather glad to divert the old man's attention from herself and her companion, and keep it fixed upon the great trunk fastened to the waggon, chained there, so that, to a vivid imagination, the stately tree might have recalled some captive monarch in the hands of his enemies. "I can't think how you come to recollect them all, or to know this one when it's cut down."

"Who should know him if I don't?" answered Jasper, laying his withered hand upon the rough bark. I've sat under his shade many a hot noon. And so he's down now! Another of 'em gone before me."

"Let's hope there's a many of 'em bound to go before you do," said the young man, who was leaning against the gate-post while his oxen rested.

"I've seen a number of 'em pass a'ready; and others besides trees," answered Jasper, who was known to look upon the leafy oaks and elms, the spreading beeches in the neighbourhood, not to mention the old ash, in the

light of personal friends. "A deal of life comes past this way without my stirring for to seek it. Me and the old ash is one most as stationary as the other; of late years in particular, by reason of my rheumatism and that, I be nigh as much planted here as he be. We see 'em come and go, him and me,—the trees I've known and the folk I've known, the one of 'em to the timber-yard, and t'others in at that there gate." He nodded his head in the direction of the little church standing by itself in the fields to the right of the road.

"That's sad talk," said the girl, a shade passing over her face. The eyes of Jasper twinkled merrily.

"'Tain't only for to be buried as folks turn in there," he said. At that, the girl tossed her head and gave a glance of displeasure towards young Tom Mavis, a displeasure which appeared wholly uncalled for, since Tom certainly had neither spoken nor laughed; indeed he did not look at all inclined to echo Jasper's merriment, his honest eyes having in them a wistful troubled expression, that, unless the heart beating under the scarlet cloak was an unusually hard one, ought surely to have touched it.

"A fellow-servant of mine," the girl began, in a cold distinct tone, that seemed to cut the poor fellow like a knife, though there was not much in her words,—"a fellow-servant of mine was married this last winter to a sister of young Mr. James, the butcher, and everything was most genteel, as was only to be expected in that family. Me and Mr. James walked to church together."

"Good-afternoon to you, Master Jasper," exclaimed the young man hastily, as though something in the above speech had suddenly recalled him to a sense of duty, "and good afternoon to you too, Myra; I can't be staying longer, with this load to fetch home before dark."

He called to the oxen, who had been patiently hanging their heads, and now in obedience to his voice put shoulder to shoulder again, and leaning towards each other dragged the heavy waggon through the gate, and disappeared a moment after as they turned the corner of the little copse.

"Them beasts pull together and share the burden fairly," remarked Jasper, looking after the waggon, while Myra persistently turned her eyes away and stared up into the branches overhead. "'Twould be a pity now if Tom was to expect 'em to trot and gallop as fast as the butcher's pony."

"He doesn't expect any such thing," said Myra, laughing.

"Ay, you be right; he hasn't any such unreasonable thoughts, Tom hasn't; he doesn't look for things where he 'ain't no right to expect 'em; the more the pity he should be disappointed when he's seeking only what he might fairly hope to find. I'd be main sorry for to see Tom disappointed."

"A disappointment is hard upon every one, and I'm sure I wish Tom Mavis well," observed Myra, in a tone of universal benevolence that made the shrewd old man chuckle.

"I'm far from saying he's as civil-spoken and smooth-faced as some," he resumed; "but there 'tis; if so be it's acorns you want, you're bound to look for 'em on oaks, whereas if ash-keys will content you, why, go to ashes for 'em!"

"You do get mixing up trees in your talk more and more, Master Jasper, every time I see you; you're getting as hard to make out as if you was a riddle in a printed book."

"There's a many saplings," Jasper went on, as though he had a mind to mix up a few more trees in the discourse and be a riddle still—"there's a many saplings I've seen start up in spring only to be cut down for poles seven years after, and there's some as is standing yet and growed to be fine timber. It's such as them last I'd like to see Tom Mavis before I die. Is it a holiday you are home for, Myra, this month with Valentine's day in it, and the birds all pairing in the bushes, and a heap of printed pictures down to the shop, so I hear tell—hearts and darts, and such like?"

"Have done!" said the girl, smiling.

"Well, go your ways home; they'll have glad hearts to see you come in at the door, and we was all young once—even him and me," with the accustomed gesture towards his friend the ash, "was young in our time. But before you're gone, let me tell you what 'tis as him and me see now we're old."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Folks going up and down the road, you know, and 'mongst 'em, as is only natural, young men and women."

"There you go again!" said the girl, laughing at him.

"Well, but wait a bit. There's one young man comes along as 'ain't but one young woman with him ever, and she the same one always. And he don't have *her* with him often neither, though I mind the time when the two was little 'uns, and trotted past together hand in hand through the summer dust and the wind in winter-time; still when she ain't there, he's alone always."

"You do talk like a book," observed Myra parenthetically.

"I 'ain't much else to do but to talk when I can get any one to listen; it's a still life, planted here by the road-

side. Let me tell my tale, lass. There's another young man as comes by often, sometimes with one, sometimes with another pretty girl talking to him, and he with a smooth tongue for 'em all alike. I've heard—nay I know it for a fact, or I'd not be letting on to you like this—that a promise comes easy to him, for to give, or for to take it back, easy either way. But then he's a smarter gentleman than the first, there ain't a doubt of that, a smarter gentleman and a quicker—quicker for to understand a thing, and for to talk to a young woman pleasant. That's where 'tis. If you want beechnuts, don't go looking for 'em on hazel-boughs; nor if your lot's cast in a clay country, don't expect to find *too* much ironstone lying about on the surface of it, as Mr. James the butcher would like to find," concluded Jasper, while Myra's cheeks, at the mention of the butcher's name, rivalled her cloak in colour.

"So Tom's got talking to you!" she said angrily.

"'Bout your affairs? Nay, lass, nay; 'tis only him and me," signing towards the ash; "we see folks come and go, and we have our thoughts. Tom has never said a word."

"He'd better not!"

Myra, who had till now never appeared to resent the sort of tacit understanding prevailing amongst her acquaintance, that Tom's faithful friendship ever since the two had been children together would one day take a dearer name and lead to a closer tie, had insensibly chafed under it since the arrival in the neighbourhood of the pleasant-spoken young butcher, beside whom Tom was nothing but a steady working man, and if, like his own oxen, slow and sure, and like them very much to be depended upon, had no brilliant qualities such as could

bear comparison for a moment with those of the smart Mr. James.

"The least slow folks can do is to be quiet as well," she said; "if Tom Mavis takes it into his head to let on as if we was promised, we shall quarrel, him and me, for we're no such thing, and as likely as not never shall be."

"Well, well," said the old man, who had been privileged all his life to bestow good advice upon his neighbours, and who, moreover, always availed himself unsparingly of the privilege—"well, well, Myra, you just make up your mind what 'tis you want; there's showy things, and there's steady things, you can have e'er a one of 'em, but never both on 'em at once, far's I've heard."

"I don't want neither of 'em!" replied Myra, with a toss of her pretty head.

She set off in the same direction as that taken by Tom and his oxen, who however had much farther to go than she had, for the great timber-yard lay a mile or two beyond the village. Jasper looked after the girl for a moment, and then remarked to his old friend opposite:

"Seemin'ly 'tain't only a different fruit from the one as it's your nature to grow, but two sorts of fruit at once they'd like you to bear now."

As he spoke he indulged in the low chuckling laugh habitual to him, but it died away quickly, and was succeeded by a heavy sigh, as Jasper bethought himself once more of the gates—gëats *he* called them—that were "going everywhere."

Meantime Myra, busy with her own thoughts, went on through the pleasant air and sunshine, tripping now and then in the deep ruts left by the waggon-wheels, and whenever she did so blaming poor Tom, whose feet had just trodden

the same road, as though the state of the lane and the weight of that great tree from Mum's Pumps had been his fault. It was so provoking to have met Mr James that day! And Tom, far from hastening to explain that the meeting of himself and Myra had been accidental, had said nothing at all, and had even laughed that frank hearty laugh of his, when the butcher, declaring three was no company, had passed on his way without stopping, but with a look of reproach that had gone straight to Myra's—heart, was it? or to that region wherever it may be in which vanity reigns supreme? Certainly Mr. James was a most genteel young man, and it would be most unfair if an old friend—and Tom never had been more than that—Myra nearly fell into a deep rut as she emphasised the words to herself—most unfair it would be of Tom to "let on," as though the girl was in any way promised to him, and spoil such prospects as Myra's might be now. But at least this poor stupid Tom had a quiet tongue in his head; Myra credited him with as much as that. And as for old Jasper, he was not one to gossip; it was only to the people concerned that he ever spoke of their affairs. And then she began to wonder what grounds Jasper had for speaking as he had done of Mr. James.

Thus thinking, the birds twittering and pairing in the bushes, the primroses peeping up everywhere in the hedge, and the young girl's heart and head full of the fancies that *do* find room in such hearts and heads, and are as natural to them as the twittering of birds or the blooming of the flowers, Myra turned the corner into the village, glad as she did so to feel sure that since Tom was not one to "let on," no one there would so much as know of that long walk of hers from Mum's Pumps.

It was impossible to resist pausing for a moment to

look in at the valentines in the shop window. Mr. Goff stood outside admiring them himself.

"A genteel selection, miss," he said, stepping back to give Myra a better view; "nothing low there; they come from London the whole lot of 'em. *You'll* not be surprised to hear how many I've sold this forenoon, for if they was all to come by post to you to-morrow morning 'twould be nothing to be surprised at! But haven't you mistook the day, Miss Myra? It's *to-morrow* as you should have taken a walk by right, isn't it?"

There was a twinkle in Mr. Goff's eye which Myra did not like. Had Tom "let on" after all?

"It suited my mistress to spare me to-day; I go back to the farm to-morrow," she said quietly.

A few doors lower down a group of girls called to her to come and tell them all about it.

"About what?" Myra stood still in the village street, and looked at her friends defiantly. She always had held her head high; there had never been any open talk about her affairs.

"Well, if you've made up your mind at last—and you've took time enough about it—you might tell us," said one.

"What's the good of tellin'? Hasn't she 'let on' enough without words? When it comes to a walk on Valentine's Eve, don't we all know what it means?" put in a pale gentle-faced girl, who spoke in a low soft voice, and had a look in her eyes as though some crook in her own lot had taught her to be careful of other people's feelings.

"Never mind them, Myra," this girl went on, stepping up to Myra and taking her by the hand; but I'm glad, dear, for I was most 'feared you'd make the same mistake as I had myself," she whispered.

Myra snatched her hand away.

"I don't know what you mean—what you are all talkin' of?" she cried. She felt beside herself with anger; her country breeding and her hot temper between them got the better of her. "I'm not one to make mistakes if you be!"

She pushed Mary Birch on one side and walked up the street to her mother's door, and entering like a small whirlwind, declared she only wished she had never come at all.

It was rather a startling greeting. The hard-worked mother looked up from the little jacket she was patching, the children in open-mouthed surprise forgot for a moment to crowd round her and welcome her as usual, and after a while Myra recovered herself.

Tom *had* "let on," and if he thought to drive her into a corner and give her no chance to say him nay, he was very much mistaken. It was all over between them: an odd turn, by-the-way, for Myra's thoughts to take, considering how positively she had asserted there never had been anything between them at all!—she would never even be friends with him again; and having come to this resolution Myra by degrees recovered her equanimity.

She took the little jacket from her mother's hands and put in the patch herself, and produced from her pocket the sweeties she had brought with her for the children. Out of doors the afternoon sunbeams were growing paler and less warm, though the early spring evening promised to be mild. The newly lighted fire crackled cheerily on the hearth within in preparation for tea-time, and nothing disturbed the peace and serenity of the little group, until Myra's mother, who was enjoying the rare luxury of a thorough rest, and actually sitting idle with her hands before her, suddenly exclaimed:

"Did you come empty-handed, lass? 'Ain't you nothin' with you but what you stand upright in?"

"I didn't want but a few things, and I put them—why, wherever is it?"

"Where be what?" asked her mother.

"My little band-box."

Myra put her hand to her head, and then flushed scarlet in sudden recollection.

"It wasn't particular heavy to carry," she said half-smiling, "but Tom took and slung it to the chains behind the timber-waggon, and I never so much as thought of it till this instant."

"Well, I'm beat!" observed the mother, adding in a lower voice, and after a moment's pause: "I'm glad it were Tom."

Myra said nothing; she knew perfectly well what her mother meant. Perhaps in her heart of hearts Myra herself may have been "glad it were Tom;" perhaps she might not have been so hot and angry, so "upset" she called it, or have felt the sudden sensation of relief that came over her now, if she had not secretly been very glad indeed that it was Tom.

She was ready enough to tell her mother how, just when she set out from the farm, where the spring sunshine shone as brightly as up here in the village, and the flock of peacocks, for which the farm was famous for miles round, had all come out about the door, and even on to the road, and were spreading their tails in the warm beams, so that the place looked as pretty as Myra ever remembered to have seen it—how just then the great timber-waggon had come groaning and creaking down the hill from Mum's Pumps, and Tom had proposed to rid her of her light burden by slinging it on behind.

Myra did not expatiate upon her perfect acquiescence and content in this arrangement until the unlucky moment when Mr. James had met them. She merely told her mother that she had not intended walking through the village in Tom's company, but only as far as the turnpike-gate, where, when the waggon went on, she forgot to reclaim her property.

"Was it that 'ere little blue band-box with the white card on, and your name wrote in big letters—that one as you had when first you went to service?" asked her mother.

Myra nodded.

After all it was not Tom who had "let on," it was the band-box.

There it went, with Myra's name in big letters upon it, swinging to and fro behind the waggon, the whole way up the village. Every one knew where the great beech had been felled, and that Myra was in service just below Mum's Pumps; every one knew she was coming to see her mother that day. What wonder the girls received her as they did, or that Mr. Goff should have his little joke?

It was an excellent joke, the village wits considered, that Tom himself had forgotten the existence of the tell-tale box, and left it to swing there, while he plodded on deep in thought beside his oxen. It was only natural that Myra should linger behind and come innocently walking up the street long after the waggon had passed, and trying to look as though nothing had happened; but it was too much to expect her friends to maintain the respectful silence Myra had always insisted upon with regard to her affairs, now that they had so good an excuse for speaking.

Later, when twilight was coming on and the mild

spring air grew damp and soft with the evening mist, Myra threw a shawl over her head and stole out to say a few words to Mary Birch, whose cottage was only a few yards below their own. The two girls stood talking together across the little white gate of the garden, beginning now to look gay with snowdrops and anemones.

"'Twas but that I believed Mr. James myself, and I've heard lately that he keeps company with another over at Hawkhurst," Mary said, in her sad voice, and Myra began to understand the secret of her friend's pale cheeks. "I never ought to have listened to him, you see. 'Is he a God-fearing man?' mother says to me. But I hadn't thought nothing of that, though as my mother says again, how can you expect him to be a good husband if he's not? 'Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?' mother asked: she's one to quote Bible words, you know, Myra."

Myra remembered the advice of old Jasper and his talk about the trees; she pressed her friend's hand in silence.

"There was a time I thought as it was *you*," Mary Birch went on; "and if so I would never have grudged him to you; but then again I began to fancy you had made the same mistake as I had, and when I heard tell of the other girl over yonder, why I was 'most sure of it, and that made me vexed for you, and glad to think it was Tom after all."

Myra did not deny that it was Tom. It was growing too dusk for Mary to see the smile on the lips of the other girl, or to notice the pretty colour in her cheeks as they exchanged a quiet kiss across the gate before parting as good friends once more as they had ever been.

It was quite dark when Tom came to the door with Myra's little property in his hand. He had not come

earlier, he explained, fancying Myra would not like to have remarks made. She laughed at him then, but in a friendly way, that it did him good to hear. Poor Tom! he and the band-box between them had made her remarkable enough already, Myra thought. He might have brought it back in broad daylight, as far as she was concerned. It *was* broad daylight—the light of St. Valentine's Day too—when they walked towards the turnpike together, and did not part till the old ash came in sight. Myra was not the least ashamed of herself; the whole village were welcome to see. Indeed, they would have to grow accustomed to the sight of the Sunday walks of those two for the future, for the question was settled at last, and Tom and Myra were to "keep company," as our lads and lasses do for years sometimes before the day comes to turn in at the churchyard gate, with truly, as Jasper had remarked, a very different object than that of being buried.

Myra received a very elegant valentine from Mr. James that morning; Mary had one also, and doubtless the girl over at Hawkhurst, and one or two other girls besides. As for Tom, he had forgotten the day altogether.

"How stupid, to be sure! I do believe I was too much taken up with you yourself to remember the day," he said, as the two stood looking in at the window where Mr. Goff still had on hand a fine show of his genteel collection. Myra did not quarrel with Tom on account of his short memory, and she tore the one valentine she had received into little pieces, with a scorn that delighted her sweetheart—they still use that old word in the village. For that matter, though the gate, *as* a gate, Mr. James would say, is gone, old Jasper, living in the little cottage, gate-house no longer, likes no sight better than that of

one or another of the sweethearts walking up the lane in the shade of the ash-tree copse, on a fine Sunday afternoon; and amongst them all there are none he is so pleased to see as Tom and Myra. These two do not turn or pass with an awkward greeting, as most do; they come up to the little bench and sit chatting to the old man for awhile, telling him how the store prospers, to which each is adding from time to time, and which, as soon as it is large enough, is to start them in a home of their own.

Yes, the old ash and the old man are together still, though at one time they ran great risk of being separated, and it was even doubtful which of them would be the first to go.

The year succeeding that which the little blue band-box had certainly helped to make an eventful year for Myra, the turnpike-gate was closed. Jasper, very rheumatic then, had a little granddaughter living with him at the time.

"I don't know what to be at," the old man said sorrowfully; "but there 'tis! I do suppose it's my turn for to learn the lesson as I've read many a time to others. A man 'ain't no right to look to be stationary himself in a world of change—not even when he's most as much planted as a tree be by the roadside. Still, I don't know what to be at next. It's time for me to be moving though, when the ash is decaying. It would be a sad tale for him to go first after all; I don't know as I could bear the sight of it."

It was true the ash was decaying. During a thunderstorm one mighty branch had been struck by lightning; but the worst mischief was owing to a great hole in the trunk, by which the wet got in, and was fast rotting the old tree.

"Spring after spring the black ash-buds look down on Jasper, sitting on sunny days upon the bench before the door."

However, the gentlefolks of the place, especially the Lord of the Manor, who owned the little copse, had no intention of allowing the village to lose its two "oldest inhabitants." When it was found that Jasper clung to the spot where he had lived so long, he was pensioned off in the tiny house, with its tiny patch of garden at the back, and is still living there.

When they first came to announce to the old man the arrangement that had been made for the comfort of his declining years, he hardly appeared as pleased as they had hoped he would be. There was evidently something on his mind. It came out at last.

"Could nothing be done for him too?" Jasper asked, with the old gesture towards the ash-tree; "if he was set in a gentleman's park now, there'd be ways of preservin' of him for years to come. Him and me have stood together for so long, 'twould be a sad tale for him to go the first. I'd 'most rather go myself, now the gëat be gone, than stay to see that happen."

Being assured that something *would* be done for the old tree, which was to be carefully protected and preserved, Jasper grew quite content and cheerful; and when later a metal plate was fixed to keep the wet out of the huge trunk, and props were placed beneath the shattered limb, he remarked with his habitual chuckle:

"Him and me both be pensioned of. He'll last my time, for it's quite certain now as I shall be the first to go."

So spring after spring the black ash-buds show amongst the larches, and look down on Jasper, sitting on sunny days upon the bench before the door, and at St. Valentine rustic sweethearts strolling down the lane, coming in sight of him in the old place. He hopes to live to see Tom

and Myra take together that walk through the churchyard, the walk of which he once spoke to them; and the only sign of increasing old age about him—or so Myra declares—is that he more than ever "mixes up trees in everything he says." She no longer finds him, however, so hard a riddle as she once pretended to do; and, indeed, his riddles always were plain and easy to be guessed. Myra is not above owning it, since she made up her mind to look for steadiness and faithful affection where she had a right, instead of no right at all, to expect to find them.

As for the roads, though the gates really are "going everywhere," the roads are neither better nor worse than they were, and probably will be the same still in days to come, when Tom and Myra "pull together, and share the burden fairly" on the road of life, while Mr. James rattles over it in his own light-hearted manner alone.

There is no talk yet of the smart young butcher marrying the girl over at Hawkhurst, or any other girl; and by-the-way, though it is a trifle hardly worth mentioning, except that "straws show which way the wind blows," and judging by it Mr. James can scarcely be a good-tempered man, *he* is the only person ever known to lose his temper when, as in the forgetfulness of extreme old age will sometimes happen, Jasper stops him on his way and demands a toll.

WAITING.

COLD weather; cold and dark. A bleak wind blowing through the village street, sweeping farther away, over frost-bound fields, along roads hard as iron, down narrow lanes, where the deep ruts had frozen, so that, rough, always, at the best of times, the lanes were rougher now than ever, blowing still farther away across the open downs towards the coast, and driving before it everywhere the low clouds in the wintry sky, driving before it also every now and then light puffs of powdery snow, although snow had nowhere fallen in those soft flakes that spread a white mantle over the world, and accord well with winter sunshine.

There was no gleam of sunshine now, and only that powdery snow, sprinkling the black hedges, drifting along the road, blown in over the threshold of open cottage-doors, or swept into corners by the restless wind, to be swept out a moment after and driven along the street again by the next fitful gust.

Dark, dull, bitter weather; weather in which sad

thoughts come home naturally to the heart and find a welcome there; weather in which forebodings of ill nestle about the hearth; in which to hope is difficult, and gloom and sorrow seem abroad in the very air.

It was in weather such as this that a little knot of villagers, men and women, stood together where the cross-roads met in the very centre of the village. A windy corner to stand in on a windy evening! A corner it would have seemed more reasonable to pass quickly by with bent head and hastening steps. The women wrapped their shawls tightly about them as their gowns fluttered in the blast, but they—the two or three of them at leisure to be there—seemed to have no more thought than the men had of turning away.

The principal buildings occupy this spot. The Sun, an imposing-looking mansion still, although its glories are in the past—the far-distant past of the old posting days—the shop, the post-office, are all here, one within a stone's throw of the other, though no two of them stand on the same road. It is here, too, that the unseen link connecting the quiet life of the village with the more tumultuous one of the outer world might in fancy seem to have its starting or its rallying point, for here the country people, shrewd of speech and thought in so many ways, ignorant, prejudiced, and narrow-minded in so many other ways, but true-hearted always, meet to hear or tell such news as reaches them. The railway station lies below the hamlet, a good two miles off; business men, the gentry and principal farmers of the neighbourhood coming from London, must needs pass by one of the roads meeting just here, so that the latest tidings from the metropolis reach this spot first of all; and it might seem that here the heart of the village re-

peated with fainter pulsations the throbbing of the grear heart of the nation itself. All these quiet sleepy-looking country places, that Time almost appears to have forgotten, where the people live from hand to mouth, work early and late, alike in the heat of summer and the chill damp of spring and autumn, and wait with dumb patience through the long frost-bound winter—all these out-of-the way nooks and corners of the land are bound into the one common brotherhood of mankind, and are apt at times to be stirred by any strong feeling that vibrates through the world at large.

It was at the cross-roads that, when the Franco-German war was raging, the village politicians found time to assemble in knots of two or three together to read the account in some newspaper they had contrived to borrow; and not the men only—the women came there to know whether sons and husbands of other women were slaying and being slain still, while the hearts of wives and mothers were breaking, and little children were left fatherless. It was here, at the cross-roads, that the news of Sedan was first heard amongst us—heard in an awed silence, until some amongst the women cried out with tears, that "God be thanked, there must at least be peace now!"

It was not, however, with war or rumour of war, or even with any great political event, for none was stirring in the world just then, that on this wintry evening the somewhat silent group at the cross-roads was concerned. Yet a link in the chain that binds the people together and makes the nation one, had been touched, though to a casual observer it might have been hard to tell what the matter was, and he might almost have imagined that some misfortune threatened the village itself, or that

some dark shadow had been cast over every humble home within it.

The few persons standing together were gathered about a young tree, planted just where the roads met, and which, as it swayed and bent in the wind, appeared to have some strange attraction for them, for they looked up at it from time to time, and one or another amongst them would lay a toil-roughened palm upon the slender stem, touching it for a moment almost tenderly, or would shake the hurdles guarding it at the base to see if they were firm and steady as they should be. They spoke to one another very little, and when not gazing earnestly at the tree, their looks for the most part were directed towards the road passing the post-office, along which, however, there was nothing to be seen but that light drifting snow. Now and then one amongst the number left the little group and hurried home as though having no more time to spare; but other watchers would join the few still standing patiently in the bitter air, some even coming from the cottages, closing the doors behind them in a determined sort of way, implying the day's work was over, and they had leisure now to wait—for what? Thus it happened that though some went away, others came in their place, and there had been a group waiting there since quite an early hour in the afternoon, till this later one in the dark winter's evening fast drawing on. Fire-light began to show through the window-panes, the bar of the public-house was lit up early, but whatever spell held the watchers, it was one not even the public-house could break, they would not stir till the last down-train was in.

"It have run up sure*lie*," remarked one of the men, throwing back his head to see the topmost branches of

the young tree near which he stood, and holding on his hat as he did so; a necessary precaution, for the wind, seized with a sudden access of fury, came rushing down the street; the garments of the women fluttered wildly, the slender tree bowed to the blast, and the last few dead leaves were whirled away upon it.

"It never did, so to say, do well," another said, shaking his head sadly.

"It have out-growed its strength, owing to the soil not being just right, or something of that nature. See how it be all height and no breadth to speak of. If it ever come to a girth corresponding to that 'ere height, 'twill be a fine tree yet. But the soil ain't right, I suspect."

So commonplace an explanation of the young tree having "run up," which it certainly had done to a marvellous extent, was by no means to be accepted, however.

"'Taint the soil, Master Byrne; I wonder at you, when we all see now what was coming upon us, as you should say it *were* the soil," observed one of the women.

"What be it, then? I don't mind ever for to have seen a tree of seven years' growth since it were set here, that had so much height and no girth for to correspond," repeated Master Byrne.

"It be Fate," replied the woman; after which oracular answer silence fell upon the group once more, and was maintained unbroken until Master Byrne, who, fully sharing the superstition of his neighbours with regard to this object of their mutual interest, was yet bold enough to fancy that if they could only hit upon the right soil, or find some other means of strengthening the young oak, it would be possible to counteract Fate, said softly, and laying his hand gently upon the stem:

"You see, 'tain't dead."

"Not yet."

The answer came from the tailor, a pale-faced man, whose habitually mournful voice sounded more mournful than usual.

"It's livin' and green at the top," Byrne said almost pleadingly; "leastwise it were green in summer."

The others assented with a strange eagerness.

"The sap stirs in the heart of it," Master Byrne went on; "maybe it will live still."

"While there's life there's hope," answered one or two.

A firm quick footstep was heard upon the road, and a young man, with a basket of tools slung upon his shoulder, came up.

They asked him at once, as they had done every one who passed, whether he had heard anything.

"What should I have heard more than you know already? What *could* I have heard where I've been working all day long, down at Leving's farm? and yet I've been stopped and had that question put to me all along the road. There is no more to hear yet, nor won't be for another hour."

He had unslung his basket, and while he spoke had rested it upon the top of the fence protecting the young tree, but knelt down now to fix one of the hurdles more securely, a task of no little difficulty in the state of the frozen ground.

"There's nothing here but stone and rubble," he said, "no nourishment for the roots; what were we thinking of to set him here? It is our own fault."

"Don't say that, Master Reeve!" exclaimed the women, in a tone of distress, that seemed scarcely accounted for by the nature of the accusation, while Byrne said eagerly:

"I *knowed* it were the soil! there ain't nothing to be

done while the frost holds; after that we can put a cart-load or so of good earth about his roots."

"Who knows what may have happened before the frost goes?" answered the young workman in a low voice.

"All has been done that could be done," remarked a bystander.

"Ay; we may be sure of that," assented his companions.

It could hardly have been the tree they spoke of now. The young man Reeve had risen to his feet, shaking the powdery snow from him as he rose, for the wind had sent it in an angry gust upon him while he worked, and had shouldered his tools again, but he seemed in no hurry to go farther, and remained standing there with the others, upon whom silence had once more fallen.

The next person to pass was a woman, who came walking swiftly, and held a warm cloak closely round her. She too paused, but only for a moment, to return the greetings made to her.

"Waiting still?" she said. "It is a cold evening for you to stand about like this."

"It won't be long now," replied Master Byrne; "the doctor's carriage and the carriage from the Hall have gone to meet the train. We shall hear the last news soon. You 'ain't heard none yourself, ma'am, I suppose?"

"There has been none to hear," she said, as she passed on, and turned into an open cottage-door a few yards down the road.

"She be gone to Jarrets'," remarked one of the women.

"There's trouble there," answered the tailor simply. They all knew that was reason enough to take their friend to Jarrets' or anywhere else, even in weather such as this.

She pushed open the cottage-door, and closed it again just in time to exclude the snow that tried to enter with her, and failing, fell, more like hoar-frost than snow, upon the door-sill and the flagged path leading to it. A man sat by the fire within the room, his head bowed, his elbows resting on his knees; he looked up only for an instant.

"No change?" the woman asked gently, as she laid aside her heavy cloak.

"None: he lies between life and death still."

"And you?" she said.

"I am waiting here; waiting to know the will of the Lord concerning him." He spoke in a dull hopeless voice.

His visitor, who had crossed the kitchen to the foot of the narrow stair leading to the upper room, turned back as though she could not leave him to his sad thoughts alone.

"His mother is with him, I suppose?"

"Yes; always with him."

"And there is still no news of Jenny?"

The man shook his head, but his words were hardly a direct reply.

"She have crossed us. Jonas 'ain't never done so—never cost us a tear till now. He seems more like our own."

"It is a heavy trial," she said, "the heavier for there being nothing left to do."

"He is our own," the father repeated, dwelling on the words as though they comforted him, "our own; we hope much from him."

A smile lit up the lady's rather homely face.

"There is other sorrow than yours in this sorrowful

"'There is other sorrow than yours in this sorrowful world,' she said."

world," she said, drawing nearer to him, and placing a hand upon the chair he sat in; "your words remind me that the same words echo in many hearts to-night, echo through all the land just now, in so many quiet villages such as this, in many large and busy towns, in the homes of the rich and great, in the cottages of the poor. They too are waiting—there at the cross-roads—to know the will of the Lord concerning one who is our own, and of whom we hope much."

"Ay, ay, that be so," the man replied; and after a pause, during which the same silence seemed to fall on them that had fallen on those other watchers at intervals all day long, the woman turned to climb the narrow stair.

In the upper room a boy lay in that border-land betwixt life and death that is reached after great sickness; the land where our dearest are beyond our reach, where we cannot follow them, or so much as know how it fairs with them in that faint struggle when human skill has touched its limit and is powerless, and there is nothing left to do for us who look on but to wait the Lord's will.

Even his mother could do nothing for the sick lad, and sat at a little distance from the bed, watching the sort of death-like stupor in whieh he had now lain for days.

"It be good of you to come," she said in hushed tones; "so bitter cold as it be too! But you're good always. When I see your face coming in at the door, I feel like as if it were my own mother—I feel that glad."

Again the bright sweet smile changed the plain face to one almost lovely; it was impossible to help smiling, for Mrs. Jarret, a hard-featured working woman, was no longer young, and her visitor had scarcely reached middle age. Still such words as those were her reward for her labours amongst her poor friends; however oddly their

feeling for her might be expressed, it warmed her heart to hear it always. She touched softly the boy's fevered brow, and smoothed the bedclothes with a practised hand.

"We must keep on hoping," she whispered; "and remember he has had the very best of care, and two doctors." She had a way of suiting her language to those she addressed, and spoke quite differently to Jarret or to his wife. "There comes a time even for the rich, who can have everything the world holds, when nothing is of any use at all, and they have to wait, just as we do by Jonas. You do not forget that, I know, or that the highest in the land has the same sore pain at her dear heart to-night that you have here by your boy's bed."

"Bless you, I know it well," the woman said. "If you fancy because my own heart aches I think less of it than them there waiting for the news outside, why, you be wrong. I think of it as much as any—more than any, when I see Jonas lie like that."

"I think too," the lady went on, still standing by the boy's bed, and looking down upon him as she spoke—"I think too, and I want you to think, that at other times than those of sickness, and about other things than sickness, when we have done all we can do, we must wait for God to do His part. You did your best for Jenny."

At the name, Jenny's mother, with a half-smothered angry exclamation, rose from her seat.

"Yes I did my best, and she were random always; it's broke her father's heart—worse nor this," pointing to the boy's flushed face upon the pillow.

"Random but a good girl always," the lady said, being well used to understand and to use even the words of her friends. "Is she in London still, does Jarret think?"

"She had her way and went to service there, and 'ain't

never been home since. Jarret's brother lives in London, and *he* 'ain't seen nothing of her. When he went to ask for her they told him she'd stole, and been turned off. Turned off where?—oh, my lass!" She threw her apron over her head and strove to check the sobs that could not, however, disturb the invalid, almost past being disturbed by anything at all.

"You brought her up well and prayerfully; I want you to trust her and Jonas both in the same Hand now."

"I do—leastwise if I couldn't when you first said her name, I can now. You do me good always. But you'll come again for to remind me, for to help us, Jarret and me, while we wait."

"Of course I'll come again."

"They be standing about the tree, then?" asked Mrs. Jarret, following her visitor to the room-door. "My, what a little chap Jonas was when it were set! To see him hammer with father's mallet on the hurdles, and he as proud as though he'd planted the tree hisself. Jarret were up in London that day to see the sight—his brother lives servant to a doctor there. You 'ain't met him, have you? You do go to London now and again."

Such an out-of-the-way, sleepy, old-world place! Such a simple folk! Jarret himself and some few others might be wiser to be sure, but this woman was a fair specimen of the average wisdom of those watching at the cross-roads to-night! The lady laughed a soft low laugh as she replied:

"I have never met him yet. You must give me his address. I should like to meet Jarret's brother up in London when I go."

"As for forgettin' what we all think a deal of now," Mrs. Jarret went on, casting a troubled look at the bed

where the sick boy made just then some uneasy movement, "I'm that far from forgettin' that if one *has* to go this time—I've heard 'tis so ordered now and then—why I'd a'most be willing as it should be our lad; his life ain't worth so much. We send 'em soldierin' willin'ly enough; let Jonas die here if *one* must die this time. The tree's dyin', they say; we know what that means: but if our lad were took, maybe the tree'd live, and he—over yonder—would live too."

A people ignorant enough for superstition such as this; and yet, the thought crossing her mind of the "Golden Legend," there were tears in the lady's eyes as she exclaimed:

"If *one* must die! Oh, Mrs. Jarret, think what you are saying. Think how *many* watch by sick-beds to-night, how many in this wide world watch by death-beds and close dead eyes to-night! Heaven does not make bargain with us such as that. The world is a large place, and *all* of us, in palaces or cottages, are in the same loving care."

She went home then, and passing through the lower room was glad to find that Jarret had left his seat by the fireside, and roused by her words, probably had gone to the cross-roads.

There was still a long half-hour before the rush of the passing train mingled with the moaning of the wind; and shortly after the sound of approaching carriage wheels was heard. The doctor's brougham came first. It was empty; the doctor frequently was detained, and failed to arrive by the train he had first mentioned; his coachman drove by without pulling up, but signed that those following would give the information sought for.

The carriage for the Hall contained a stranger, some

guest of the Squire. He was an excitable man, and when the vehicle stopped at the cross-roads, and the faces of one or two of the men looked in at the windows on either side, so that to his somewhat vivid imagination he seemed to be surrounded by a mob, he let down the glass and put out his head, nervously demanding:

"What's wrong? Why are we stopping? Is anything the matter? Go on, coachman, go on: I shall be late for dinner as it is."

"Beg pardon, sir, you be from London?" asked the pale-faced tailor, pushing to the front, and placing his hand upon the carriage.

"From London? yes: what then? what is it you all want?" questioned the traveller, his surprise not wholly unmixed with alarm. They were strange people in these parts to stop him on the road like this. Did they mean to rob him? Was this a lonely place? Thrusting his head still farther out, he saw in the gathering darkness the houses standing round, the lights in the cottage-panes, and that the coachman and these unceremonious highwaymen were conversing amicably. Reassured, he asked again what it was they wanted.

"The latest news, sir, if you would be so good—the latest news of the Prince."

The gentleman's manner changed at once.

"Is *that* what you wait standing in the cold to hear?" he said gravely. "There is no change yet: in all the length and breadth of the land the Queen's people wait as you are waiting. I saw them in the bitter wintry evening yesterday—an anxious crowd standing patiently in London streets; they are standing in the cold again to-night, I have no doubt of that. There is no change yet."

"The evening papers were in when you left, sir?" The

tailor's quick eye had caught sight of one lying upon the seat. The gentleman handed it to him at once.

"Read for yourselves," he said, and would have driven on again, but that they told him with one voice the paper would be eagerly asked for at the Hall. So they pored over the bulletin, spelling it out by the light of the carriage-lamps, and after that the Squire's guest was permitted to resume his interrupted drive.

Time passed, and the cloud lifted slowly; the long suspense was over, the Prince restored to us, and, as the early weeks of the new year went by, slowly regaining health. Soft spring sunshine shone in the village as it did everywhere; but when spring east winds blew, the good housewives observed to one another that they hoped "*he* were takin' care of hisself, for it didn't do to run no risks," and they turned anxious glances upon the budding boughs of the young oak, which—quite in accordance with all that was expected of it—looked healthier and more promising than it had ever looked before. Whether the roots had struck so deeply down as to find better nourishment at last, or whether there was after all some other and more occult reason for the visible improvement in its growth, must always remain a mystery. Certain it is the tender green leaves were more luxuriant than they had ever been yet, and when the mild airs of February wooed them, the oak planted upon the occasion of the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales, though it was still of a decidedly surprising height in proportion to its slender girth, was in full health and vigour. Even Master Byrne forgot his suggestion of putting a cartload of good earth about the roots, and began to fancy it really had been Fate and nothing else that had ailed the tree in that sad winter time.

It was very slowly that the tide had turned with Jonas; very slowly and doubtfully that the first symptoms of recovery had shown themselves; and the convalescence of the little lad was long and tedious: still he did recover.

"Seein' him about again, I mind your words when he was bad, and take heart at times for Jenny," his mother said to that good friend of hers.

Nothing had yet been heard of the wilful girl who had insisted upon taking service with a stranger in the unknown world of London, but her parents had not the added pain of thinking her a thief; they could not believe it of a child of theirs, they said, and, indeed, it would have been difficult for any knowing them or knowing Jenny herself to believe it either.

There had been some mistake, and she was too high-spirited to come back after failing in her wilful schemes, or with any slur upon her name, the mother insisted; but where was she? what would become of her alone in London, and she a random girl at best, though never bad at heart?

Taking comfort in the daily progress towards health and strength of Jonas, who seemed more their "own" than ever, in the open weather the couple went to work again, as their neighbours did, and worked the harder that the boy's long illness had brought debt upon them —a burden which it is all but impossible for the poor to avoid in times of sickness. Their credit was good, however, at the shop, the rent at least was safe, and it was to be hoped Jonas would himself be able to earn a trifle when summer came. Where all were poor, the Jarrets were not worse off than many of their neighbours, who began with them the year's round of toil, glad that to toil

was once more possible, and the weary waiting-time of winter past and gone.

And then, in the midst of homely duties, and the hard labours by which the daily bread was daily earned in the humble households of the village, the pulses of the people were once more stirred by a thrill from the outer world. This time the nation was rejoicing.

It caused quite an excitement in the place when it was known that Jarret's brother in London had suggested to him to come up on the day when the Royal Family were to return thanks in St. Paul's Cathedral for the recovery of the Prince, and had suggested also that since the little lad was of no use at home just now, he should go with his father and see the world for once.

This would have been impossible but for their friend. She furnished means for the trip, pressing it upon Jarret, at first loath to take money from her. She thought change would do him good, and had, moreover, a strong opinion that it was well the ties binding loyal hearts in one should be fully recognised, and drawn as closely as might be now and then. It was decided, therefore, that father and son should take the journey; as for Mrs. Jarret, she would wait still for Jenny, who might come at any moment. And when it was known that Master Jarret really was going up to London, one or two others in the village made up their minds to do the same. Some amongst these deprived themselves of actual necessaries in order to scrape together the few needful shillings, and returned afterwards to be the heroes they are to this day; for had they not seen the Queen face to face, and been as it were the ambassadors of her subjects in this far-off hamlet to bear to her their share of the prayers and loyal wishes with which the very air of that February day was laden?

And with what patience the people waited still!—waited from the dark, cold, earliest morning, when they could hardly see each others' faces, and stood packed closely together in one dense mass all along the route; pressing up against the barriers, those perhaps happiest who were most uncomfortably squeezed and pressed upon, for were they not in the front row, and would they not have the best view? but every one in the whole crowd happy to find themselves there at all; waiting patiently—for what? The one brief moment when their eyes might rest upon the face of the Queen, whose long watch her people had shared, and on his face for whose life they had prayed.

There, amongst the crowd, stood Jarret, with his rugged sensible features intent and quiet, and Jonas with him, quite bewildered and amazed, yet ready at the right moment to look with all his heart in his eyes. It was so soon over, that one moment, and then the barriers were removed, and the wonderful tide of human life poured into the gaily-decorated streets, and flooded them from end to end. Jonas, who had never seen so many people in his life, never so much as dreamt there could be so many in the world, which he began to think must be a bigger place than he had hitherto supposed, found it difficult to follow his father as closely as he had been bid to do—so much was there to gaze at on every side. The boy was quite dazzled—"dazed-like" *he* called it, by-the-way—so much astonished, that it was hardly any new surprise when a hand was placed upon his shoulder, and turning, he found himself face to face with his sister Jenny.

At first he did not speak at all, and when he did, it was to ask her eagerly whether she had come there to see

the Prince, as though it were likely she was there for any other cause than that which had turned the whole population into the streets that day. Jenny laughed a little as she drew him to one side.

"What's been the matter with you, lad?" she said: she had always loved this young brother, years younger than herself, and the Benjamin of his parents' old age; his pale cheeks and wasted form filled her with dismay. "What's been wrong with you? You do look bad."

"I've been bad," said Jonas.

"What was it ailed you?"

"Same as the Prince," said the boy, with an odd pride in the announcement; "we had the same illness, him and me."

"But the Prince were nigh death!"

"So were I; a many has it, they say, but the Prince and me were terrible bad, sure*lie*. Oh Jenny!" with a sudden remembrance of all the anxiety they had gone through on her account, and of how glad he was to see her, and what a wonderful thing it was to come upon her suddenly like this—"wherever have you been? Mother have fretted above a bit."

"Fretted along of a thief," she said, with a short laugh.

"As if we, any on us, was goin' to believe that!" Jonas clung to her as he spoke, as though afraid to lose her once more in the crowd that had drifted her towards him.

"Well, I didn't suppose you would believe it e'er a one of you; but I wasn't goin' to turn back home with such a tale as that, after all they'd said against my coming up here to live, not if I could contrive to get on anyways respectable by myself."

"Have you contrived it?" asked the boy.

"Same as the Prince; we had the same illness, him and me."

"Pretty well. A friend of mine, a respectable girl herself, and I, we got work together in one of the big shops. It wasn't myself as I meant to let on about. I shouldn't have come nigh you, though I've seed you this hour past; how you *did* look, Jonas! and your eyes is that wide open now as you'll find it hard to shut 'em when you have to go to sleep to-night."

She laughed again, and then sighed, and touched the boy's thin cheek gently with her hand, repeating that she "should not have come nigh him if he hadn't looked so bad."

"I've been bad, I tell you. But you'll come home with us to-day, Jenny, won't you, dear. Mother did just fret."

"And father; he were hard, I suppose?"

"Not particular; if you was to come home, he'd be right enough. Oh Jenny! wherever has he got to? He told me to keep close to him, and there I've been and lost him. It's an awful place, London! I'll never find him in it, nor find myself either for that matter."

"Father'll go to Uncle Jarret's, of course," Jenny remarked, a little absently, and still looking at the boy as though she could not recover from her surprise and sorrow at his changed appearance.

"And how am I to find Uncle Jarret, either?" asked Jonas, in a resigned tone that made her laugh.

"London ain't nothin' when you know your way about, nor if you don't know it neither, so long as you've got a tongue in your head. I'll set you right, lad. I don't wish to see father myself. It was odd runnin' up against one another in this crowd, wasn't it now? and we not thinking of one another at the time."

"It were the Lord's doin'," answered Jonas seriously; the little lad had his father's way of speaking of serious

things, and it had grown upon him since his illness; "we've waited for you such a length of time, and the Lord has heard us, and sent you home."

"I'm not home yet," said Jenny, in a low voice.

But either Jonas was too wise to let her go again, so that she was taken in by his assurances that he never could find his way a yard alone, and would be lost altogether should she lose sight of him for an instant, or his pale cheeks had touched her too nearly, for they did not separate again, and she met her father after all.

Softened by his recent trouble, and influenced by the feelings abroad in the blessed sunshine of that Thanksgiving Day, Jarret was not "hard" at all, but gentle and patient with her, inclining fully to the belief of Jonas, that it was the Lord's mercy that had brought about this meeting with Jenny.

"You needn't look at me like that," she exclaimed once, "I 'ain't come to no harm; only I wasn't minded to come home and be a burthen when it was my own fault, so to say, through goin' against your wishes, as I'd throw'd away the chance of getting another place. I can't get one without a character; they wouldn't give me one where I lived last, and I wasn't goin' home till I'd earned one somewheres else. That's all about it, father," concluded Jenny, a little defiantly.

"I suppose that might be the way of it," replied Jonas gravely; "you're welcome home now, dear lass; better late than never."

At that Jenny melted into tears, sobbing out that he was good to forgive her; and so the bread cast upon the waters returned again, and the "random" girl went safely home with her father and brother to gladden her mother's heart.

Years have rolled over England since that day; but Jonas, though he has marched bravely in the foremost ranks of the march of intellect that has not passed even his native village by, and has carried us all—so they say —very far upon the road since then, speaks always of the winter of 1871 as "that time, you know, when the Prince of Wales and me was bad."

But Jarret, looking at his son grown a strong man now, and fulfilling all his parents' hopes of him, looking too at Jenny—"random" no longer, but married and settled near her parents, and the joy of their declining years—Jarret, mixing up in his thoughts, just as Jonas does, his own time of trouble with the national trouble then, speaks of the same winter as "the time when we all on us waited for the Lord, and He inclined His ear unto us and heard us."

OUR ROSIE.

"OUR Rosie be a very harmless child."

That is what Bennet will be pretty sure to say to you if you speak to him of the one girl in his family of rough lads. His meaning might, perhaps, puzzle a stranger, since to look at Rosie, not the most timid imagination could suppose her capable of harming any one, so that such an assurance seems, to say the least, somewhat uncalled for. Neither does the sight of her suggest that she has more than her fair share of the mischievous propensities common to her tender years; and in point of fact, Rosie tears fewer frocks and soils fewer pinafores in the week than most of her companions, and can be trusted to do any errand steadily. A quiet little lass, with light hair and blue eyes, and a sunny smile on the round face, whose rosy cheeks tell as plainly of soap and water as they do of fresh air and plentiful meals; a little maiden who is a perfect picture of a village child, and might sit for a new "Age of Innocence," had we a new artist capable of painting one. The remark Bennet is so fond of making

"'Monday was a week I gave a whole pound of blackberries to our pig; they *was* just ripe.'"

merely means that his little daughter has a certain friendly and winning way with her that goes straight to people's hearts, and makes her a favourite everywhere.

Such is the recognised meaning of the word hereabouts. Mercy Bright, who lives in the ivy-covered cottage at the corner, where the sweetbrier in the hedge scents the air so strongly on a summer's evening, and where the children find the first violets in spring—Mercy, with her gentle voice and smile, and the friendly words she has for every one, is a "harmless" woman, just as Rosie is a harmless child.

Rosie is friends with every one. The roughest of the men, as they go backwards and forwards about their work, or turn in at The Crown and Anchor of an evening, have a kind word or nod for her. Even when some amongst them come away with unsteady steps from that door near the cross-roads, and other children run past quickly, she never hurries, but goes by with half-averted looks, full of a strange childish pity. The worst of the poor fellows must be far gone indeed before he would frighten Rosie.

The other day, when some young ladies staying at the Hall took it into their heads to go blackberrying along our lanes, where the tangled briars stretch for miles, and the fruit is every autumn in such rich plenty, they came upon Rosie walking home demurely from the shop, her mother's basket, almost as big as the child herself, hanging on her arm. Deeply interested in the proceedings, and, moreover, rather wondering at them, Rosie spoke at once.

"Monday was a week I gave a whole pound of blackberries to our pig; they *was* just ripe."

"To the pig! why, what a shame!" The girls laughed at this friendly little person who accosted them with such small ceremony.

"He liked 'em," says Rosie, smiling. "Don't pigs like things same as other people?" She set her basket carefully in the hedge—for, to put one phase of Rosie's harmlessness negatively, as her mother was apt to do, "she was no ways random"—and began, as a matter of course, and without invitation, to help fill the baskets of the young ladies, prattling all the time with so much artlessness and modesty, that the strangers fancied themselves in Arcadia.

You do see such children now and then, who invite the confidence of all, seem sure of kindness from every one they meet, and hardly know what the word stranger means. Rosie knows it so little, that the one fault her mother finds with her is that she has no manners.

"Our Rosie will speak to any who come along, tramps or what not; and if you'll believe me, she'll up and speak to the gentry themselves, just as soon as to you or me! She don't appear to see the difference in folk. I tell her she 'ain't *no* manners," said Mrs. Bennet, upon the occasion of the blackberry-gathering just alluded to; though, indeed, the poor woman is in constant perplexity from a similar cause, as, for instance, when the young squire was at home from college once, and Rosie meeting him at a time when her heavy basket was heavier than usual, had asked him in the prettiest way in the world to "feel the lift of it, and help her with it for a bit," and "thanked him kindly" as he set it down laughing at the cottage-door.

"Do 'em good to be spoke to now and again as if they was flesh and blood like ourselves," grumbled an old lady, whom her neighbours knew to be the most smooth-tongued amongst them when anything was to be had from Hall or Rectory.

"For my part, I've always homaged my betters," replied Mrs. Bennet good-humouredly; "and I've brought the lads up to do the same; but Rosie, now 'tisn't that she's anyways bold, but she've *no* manners; she don't so much as wait for the gentry to speak first—and they don't seem to mind it neither," the worthy woman added in a puzzled tone. Where was the good of trying to teach Rosie manners, if the gentry encouraged her in these evil ways?

Of course they do not mind it. The child speaks to every one she meets, or whose way is the same with hers when she goes to and from school. Singing to herself as she pulls wild flowers in the hedges, or stands amongst ripe corn, almost as high as the head over which no more than eight summers have yet passed, she puts her innocent questions and makes her little remarks to any, gentle and simple alike, who cross her path, and no one ever has minded it yet. In fact she is "Our Rosie" to all the village, to the Squire's family, and the other resident gentry, no less than to her own companions, and to every hard-working man and woman in the place. The Vicar in particular is a great ally of this small parishioner of his, and declares she does much good. "Even a child is known by its ways," he observes, and says the harmless ways of Rosie, so good, so innocent, so docile to his teaching always, are very pleasant to him.

When asked, as he sometimes is, what good the child can possibly do? the Vicar answers that to *be* good is more often than we think to *do* good also; that so friendly a little soul makes every one friendly round her, and is a bond of union amongst us; and he winds up always with his strongest point: "And then there's

Martha Finch," the Vicar says; "you can't deny that was a great work of our Rosie's."

At one time there certainly was an exception to the almost universal favour with which Rosie was regarded. There is none now—none since the child unconsciously brought sunshine into the darkened life of the only person who looked coldly upon her.

The smallest house in the village is that next door to the Bennets', so small a house that it seems as if it must have been originally part of theirs, and sliced off on second thoughts to afford accommodation for another family. It consists of two rooms only, one above and one below; for though a scullery adjoins this latter, the proportions of the room are curtailed by just the space the scullery occupies, and it is just that much smaller than the room overhead. There is a slip of garden before the low door, and the fence dividing this slip from the larger one of the Bennets has always been kept as carefully in repair as though it actually formed an effectual barrier against possible inroads of the little Bennets, instead of being so low that a two-year-old baby can see over it. The really effectual barrier between the two families was, for long, Mrs. Finch's way of "keeping herself to herself," and the somewhat disdainful estimation in which she was known to hold, not the Bennets only, but most of her other neighbours.

It was the death of her husband that had brought her back to her native parish, and with her a year-old babe, in whom the very existence of the mother seemed bound up. Having been long away there were few who remembered her, and the idea prevailed generally, that, to say nothing of the "genteel" Hastings lodging that had been her married home, it was a sad come-down for Martha

Finch, after living for years as head-housemaid in a titled family and marrying the own brother of the butler, to return to the village at all; for she had nothing to look to now but field-work the same as her neighbours, and hard, often scanty fare, such as theirs was.

Perhaps it was her own consciousness of this come-down in life that made Martha Finch hold her head so high, as, with tight-shut lips, never parting in kindly interchange of gossip with the other women, and with frowning brow, she went to work in harvest-time, or during hopping; where, holding on to the bin into which her mother's busy fingers picked, the little girl first learnt to stand alone, but was kept then, as always, apart from the other children in the place. There were not wanting some to wonder jealously that Mrs. Finch demeaned herself to field-work at all; but, although no one looking at her could forget for a moment her eminently respectable connections on her husband's side, a respectability betrayed in every fold of her dress, even when it grew to be more and more faded and worn, no hard work seemed to come amiss to her.

Nothing came amiss to *her*, but it was soon evident that life for little Lizzie was to be as easy as her mother could make it. Though seldom allowed to mix with the "common children," as Mrs. Finch styled them, the little girl accompanied her mother from time to time when she went to drink tea in the cosy parlour behind the shop, or the cosy bar of The George Inn, the landlady of which had been herself a servant in "the first families," and looked upon Martha as an equal, appreciating properly the immense distance that was between her career and that of the numberless girls who left their cottage homes for service in ordinary places, and came back to marry labouring men.

The butler brother-in-law came down once or twice while Lizzie was still a little creature, and toddled up the street holding by her uncle's forefinger. He put up at The George, but the great being was not above taking a friendly glass at The Crown and Anchor, after he had said good-night to his sister-in-law in her tiny room, where they had taken tea together, and where, owing to the spotless cleanliness and neatness, and to the photographs of "my lady" and the young ladies and gentlemen that adorned the walls, they might almost have imagined themselves once more in the housekeeper's room of the tall town-house in which they had shared so many meals in former days.

It was my lady up in London who paid for Lizzie's schooling, stipulating only that she should be sent to the National School and to no other, and who had undertaken to provide her start in life when she was ready for it.

It was only reasonable, Martha Finch considered, that with such a prospect the child should be taught to keep herself to herself, and not be brought up exactly like those who had nothing to look to. The National School was not what Mrs. Finch would have chosen for her daughter; and though the little girl was sent regularly enough until she had reached the top of the first class, no sooner was that position attained than the probable object of my lady's wise stipulation was defeated by her being withdrawn altogether.

By the time our Rosie first began to trot down the long hill to the school-house, Lizzie, then a tall pale slip of a girl of thirteen, had ceased her attendance there. She read her book at home, her mother said. She certainly did a great deal of crochet-work there, and began to exhibit a talent for trimming her Sunday bonnet, and pro-

ducing an effect with an end of ribbon that was really surprising in one so young. In fact, though Lizzie had been trained to keep the tiny house in order, and did it quite as well as the ex-head-housemaid herself, that threatened to be the girl's only valuable accomplishment. She was growing up half-educated, with notions above her station, and a most complacent trust in everything being done for her, as not a few girls of her class do grow up, when mothers are foolish, and expectations from others rob them of the spirit of independence. Was it a hard saying, I wonder, or too sadly true of a good many in the village, that saying of our shrewd Scotch doctor: "If you help one of these people over a stile, they expect you to carry them home"?

Perhaps harder work might have been better for Lizzie both physically and mentally, for, as the neighbours said, she was "but a dwiny pale-faced thing;" though they could not but own that, standing in the cottage doorway, and dressed in the light prints her mother made her, and with her eternal crochet-needle in hand, the girl did look "genteel."

Many a homely word of kindness came to Lizzie across the low fence; but it was only Rosie who, ever since she could stand up by it and peep over the top, had seemed wholly unconscious of any difference between herself and their next-door neighbours.

For Mrs. Finch, "high" with every one, was doubly high with the Bennets; those great rough lads, and the little girl allowed to spend her time, as Lizzie had never been at any age, with the tribe of children generally to be seen playing in the dusty road that formed the main street of the village. These children were the very little ones, too small to be sent alone the long mile to school;

and well was it for them that from her tenderest years "Our Rosie" interested herself in them, for no one else did so; and—saddest of all sounds!—bad words from baby lips were too often heard amongst them at their play—that is, when Rosie did not join it. When she did, she had a little motherly way of keeping them innocently amused that "must," Mrs. Bennet thought, "be good for them," for which reason she never interfered, but allowed the child to do as she liked on holidays, or the long afternoons of summer, when there were still several daylight hours after school was out.

The summer that Lizzie reached her sixteenth year her taste for finery and predilection for a quiet genteel business decided her career, and my lady fulfilled her promise by apprenticing the girl to a milliner in Hastings. It was a hard parting for the mother. With her lips more tightly pressed together even than usual, and her face grave and stern, she stood at her own gate as the carrier's cart disappeared slowly down the road. The colours of her cotton gown were faded from frequent washing, and it was much patched and darned, while Lizzie's clothes were good and new; but to all outward appearance Martha Finch was, as she had ever been, eminently respectable, and quite sufficient to herself, though inwardly her very heart was sinking, and she knew that the light of her eyes had been taken from her.

"I doubt she takes it hard, though she ain't one to show it; we all know how she be bound up like in poor Lizzie," observed Mrs. Bennet, glancing through her window.

The same thought, or one akin to it, must have been in Rosie's mind, when she suddenly threw her arms round her stern neighbour, and, looking up in her face, exclaimed:

"We'll miss Lizzie ever so much, and we'll be ever so pleased when she's home again!"

Knowing of old that the friendliness of Rosie was irrepressible, Mrs. Finch did nothing worse than shake the child off somewhat angrily, and bid her mind her own business, for no one asked *her* to miss Lizzie. The repulse, though only what might have been expected, called a hot flush to Mrs. Bennet's cheek.

"There's ne'er a one but her in the place as would serve our Rosie so," she muttered; but the child herself only walked more slowly than her wont up their own garden, and entering the cottage observed thoughtfully:

"Mis' Finch be that put out to lose Lizzie as makes me main sorry for her, mammy; I feel like to fret, I do;' upon which, however much it might have relieved the good woman's feelings to comment upon "Mis' Finch's" behaviour, she kept her thoughts to herself and said nothing.

Through all that summer Lizzie's mother worked as hard as she had ever done, laying by her earnings for her daughter, and still asking for no sympathy in her lonely life, but keeping herself to herself in her old fashion. When autumn came, however, little as Mrs. Finch "neighboured" with any one, it was plain to all that she had some deep cause for anxiety, even had not the rumour arisen that millinery, or Hastings, or both together, were not agreeing with Lizzie, and that her health was failing. By the winter she was once more at home, the bright spot upon each cheek, the dry hard cough telling their own tale.

The short aimless life was drawing to a close, while our Rosie was strong and hearty at her work and play.

Mrs. Finch took in needlework that winter. My lady

allowed a few shillings a week, sent through the butler, who could not resist a regretful allusion to the money wasted on the premium, and the cottage-door was kept as jealously closed as hitherto. Martha Finch wanted no help, still less did she want sympathy. She shut herself in with her dying girl, and mother and child were once more all in all to each other, as in the days of Lizzie's childhood, before she dreamt of a genteel business, or developed that taste for bonnet-trimming.

At the turn of the year, when the days began to lengthen, and later when warm mild weather came, so that the door was often set open in order that Lizzie might look out upon the little garden, though every one else recognised the fact that, as far as neighbourly visits were concerned, the door was metaphorically closed still, Rosie could not be brought to recognise it at all. She was for ever slipping in and out, now with the first primroses found in the hill wood, now to exhibit her Sunday School prize, now simply to ask how Lizzie did, and whether she was not a little better yet. Although for some reason or other, possibly because of the blooming health that offered such a contrast to the looks of her own daughter, Mrs. Finch seemed almost to hate the sight of Rosie, after Lizzie's faint "Let her be, mother; I like to have her come," no further objection was made. The child was not allowed to stay, however; only for a passing moment now and then did the little face brighten the tiny room that held within its four walls such an infinity of pain.

With who knows what vain regrets over the idle girlhood slipping so fast away, Lizzie would murmur from time to time that she wished she had been of more use, of as much use as Rosie even, and would lie with a cold

"Her dull dry eyes were fixed upon the cushioned chair in which Lizzie had passed so many weary days."

tear or two trickling down her cheek. If, at such times, Martha Finch blamed herself for the manner in which she had brought up her girl, she never said so, but soothed her tenderly, and kept her own regrets to herself.

In those days the Vicar ministered faithfully to the dying girl, and to the mother, who needed his ministrations fully as much. Lizzie was patient and gentle. The self-complacency that had been her chief characteristic was all gone now; the weak spirit gathered strength to face the coming change, and lingering illness taught lessons her mother's blind affection would fain have spared. But on Martha Finch herself the Vicar's words of counsel or of consolation had no effect. He did not like to think of how the blow would be borne when it should fall at last.

At Easter the last parting came. In the low-lying meadows near the church the lambs were at play, and flowers bloomed everywhere, when Lizzie was carried to the churchyard, but Mrs. Finch hardly seemed to see the blossoms strewn by the children over the new-made grave. She walked home in silence from the funeral she had attended with dry eyes, only turning at her own gate to thank those who had gone with her; and then entering alone the desolate room, where she shut herself in with her grief as she had done with her respectability. Through the bright days of early summer, and the longer warmer ones of harvest-time alike, she sat alone and sewed, or dreamt over the past—the short past of her child's life—for had any been there to see, they might have noticed that for hours the work lay neglected on her lap, and her dull dry eyes were fixed upon the cushioned chair in which Lizzie had passed so many weary days. The poor rarely take to their beds until the

very last, and Lizzie had been in that lower room twenty-four hours preceding her death.

From the small quantity of work taken in, the scanty pay it brought might have been calculated without much difficulty, so that it might not have been difficult either to guess how the time passed in the cottage, the threshold of which its mistress so rarely crossed, or what poor food was partaken of by the mother whose heart was slowly breaking within its walls. But it was no one's business to interfere in the affairs of Mrs. Finch, who had always kept her neighbours at a distance, and had given no sign that even now she wished them to draw nearer. She did not so much as ask who placed the flowers on Lizzie's grave that were seen there every Sunday; and when, from having once found Rosie in the act of replacing the faded blossoms by fresh ones, she must have known to whom she owed this tribute to the memory of her dead child, Martha Finch had not so much as a word of thanks for the kind-hearted little maid. Therefore her neighbours stood aloof, where, for all Lizzie's life, her mother had bid them stand, though the woman looked after her pitifully as she went "up street" to the shop, appearing each time more gaunt and thin, and with that dull stare in her eyes which it was not good to see. Mothers kept their children out of her way upon such occasions.

"It will, may be, hurt her for to come across them, and she with her one chick under the sod," they said.

Even Rosie was bidden to let her go by without speaking.

As the harvest drew to a close, and it was nearly time for school to open once again, our Rosie had cares of her own.

Day after day through all the holidays, she might have

been seen marshalling her flock of white-headed boys and toddling girls under the hedge of the corn-field just opposite her father's door; and, as Rosie observed, whatever would become of her children when she had to go back to school herself? It promised to be a fine autumn, and there would be weeks yet before cold weather drove the little ones to the safer shelter of their own homes. As long as it was possible to turn them out to play the mothers were certain to continue doing so.

One afternoon, when really the future of her self-constituted charges began to weigh very heavily upon the mind of Rosie, the Vicar and the lady from the Hall walked up the road together. At the gate of the corn-field they paused.

"Why, what a flock our Rosie has got together here!" the lady said.

"When I'm back at school they'll get tumbling about in the dust, making theirselves not fit to be seen, and learning bad ways!" exclaimed Rosie; and they're *that* good with me as you wouldn't believe without you was to see 'em."

"I can easily believe it," the Vicar said, smiling at the earnest little maid.

"What do you do with them?" asked the lady.

"Oh, we play! We keep school too, sometimes. They know their letters, most of 'em; and Moses he've learnt a hymn. Come along, Moses, and speak your piece to the lady."

"The mothers of these little ones are a careless set, I fear," the Vicar observed, after the piece, with much prompting from the teacher, had been duly spoken; "it would be a great thing if the little ones could be kept

together and taught their letters till they are big enough to go to school. I must see about it."

"Rosie *has* seen about it," laughed his companion; a little hedge-schoolmistress! But is there really no one but this child to do this work?"

The friends passed on talking the matter over as they went, and leaving Rosie standing in the sunshine and full of thought, for she had heard and understood. *Was* there no one else to keep the little ones together, and teach them their letters, as the Vicar suggested? As the question passed through her mind, her eyes fell upon the low door next her own. The sight of that door at that particular moment must have suggested the plan that at once presented itself to Rosie, and which certainly was a plan that would have presented itself to no other person in the place, for on a sudden impulse she crossed the road, and Martha Finch, disturbed within her solitary room by the sound of a hand upon the latch, called out sharply to know who was there.

"It be only me," said Rosie, full of the idea that possessed her just then, and entering boldly. "Oh, please, Mis' Finch, will you let my children come here for to be out of harm's way, and learn their letters? Come Monday week school opens, and I can't see to 'em no more myself. There's only Betsey Ann as is big enough to go along of me down the steep hill to the school-house; I can mind her same as though she was my little sister, but then there's all the rest of 'em—and oh! don't it look as if Lizzie was here still? I miss her ever so much, I do!"

Rosie's voice had begun to falter, and her looks to stray round the small room, long before her speech came to an end.

The child had not crossed the threshold since Lizzie's death; and now the sight of the chair, the books upon the shelf, the mirror before which the young girl used to try on her bits of finery, the sight of the mother sitting there alone, seemed to wring her heart; for, lifting a corner of her pinafore to her eyes, Rosie sobbed aloud.

Martha Finch looked for a moment at the child as she stood in the open doorway, the sunshine beating on the white dusty road beyond.

"What brought you here? Why do you dare to come in here?"

"Along of the children," repeated Rosie, drawing nearer, so that only the little work-table separated the two; "you don't go out no more, but sit at home all day; and wouldn't they be company for you when you're so sad for Lizzie, and keep missing of her all day long? They're very lovin', particular' Moses; you wouldn't believe what a one for lovin' and kissin' Moses be."

The little earnest tear-stained face was near the window now, as though Rosie herself would have loved and kissed her had she dared.

The woman pointed angrily to the door.

"Your children! Is the world coming to an end, that you run in and out and chatter your nonsense to *me?* How dare you do it?"

"I miss Lizzie ever so much," sobbed the child, laying a small hand upon the empty chair. "The little 'uns 'ain't got no one to see to 'em and you be all alone."

She seemed puzzled. Having come there in the first instance for the sake of her children only, it almost appeared that she stayed there for the sake of the desolate mother herself, and that her only object was to persuade Martha Finch to take comfort in the loving ways of those

little ones whose cause Rosie pleaded with so much earnestness.

Her words had no effect, or seemed to have none.

"Go, child, and think twice before you have the ill manners to come where you are not wanted!" Mrs. Finch said sternly. If her thin hand trembled as it used not to do, and if there was a look of dumb pain in her eyes that never had been there while Lizzie lived, Martha Finch was still as formidably respectable as she always had been, and there was nothing for it but to obey her mandate.

Repeating once more that she did miss "Lizzie ever so much," and wiping her eyes still, Rosie turned reluctantly away, and in another moment the sunshine and the sweet tearful face were shut out together.

It was strange that Mrs. Finch, who had shown so much displeasure at this unexpected visit, should rise, and, stepping to the window, watch Rosie as she crossed the road to where her children were clustered about the gate—watch how she coaxed one, seemed to be chiding another, and was occupied in that motherly way of hers with each of them in turn. Perhaps the weak complaining voice of Lizzie sounded in the ears of her mother as she looked on at the little scene. "I've been no good to no one; never so much good as Rosie, even." Or perhaps the first spoken words of sympathy that had broken the chill silence of the room, the first tears shed there for the dead girl, had touched the heart of the bereaved mother, for she took up the habit of watching Rosie from the window, on the sill of which the geranium plants once tended with pride and care, were now all dead and withered—watching the children of happier mothers, and thinking of the lonely grave where a child's hands strewed flowers

week by week, and turning, with dry eyes still, to see the empty chair opposite her own.

Nearly a fortnight went by thus, and when the Monday came on which school re-opened, it was with the first faint feeling of interest in anything but the one sad subject that occupied her thoughts, through the lonely days and the long sleepless nights, that Martha Finch glanced furtively from between the withered geraniums, to see what arrangements Rosie, after all, had contrived to make for her little friends, or what they would do that day when Rosie went by, her bag of books under her arm, and left them to themselves.

Rosie never went by at all.

Nine o'clock came and went. Many a little scholar had gone down the road; groups of two or three together, laggards sauntering by themselves, "ten o'clock scholars" racing past in the vain endeavour to overtake lost time, and with the certain prospect of pains and penalties to come—but no Rosie. There were the white-headed children at play together in the dust, and there amongst them was Betsey Ann, who should by rights have been making her way, clinging to Rosie's hand, down the steep schoolhouse hill. Martha Finch could not settle to her work until the morning was far advanced; and when she did sit down at last to the small round table, she actually moved the flowerpots upon one side, that she might, from her accustomed seat, keep watch upon the children still.

Dinner-hour arrived in due course; those rough boys of Bennet's and Bennet himself turned in next door, and by-and-by turned out again to work. The dusty children were fetched home one by one, and dragged past crying lustily, and were before long turned out once more to play or quarrel in the road. And still no sign of Rosie.

What could have happened to the child? As evening drew on, Martha Finch wondered she should think so often of the little figure that had stood in her own doorway lately, wondered she should seem to hear the childish sobs, and not be able to forget how she had driven away the tear-stained little face, and how the room had been duller ever since. That night there was something else to think of as she lay awake than her lost Lizzie, and when she fell asleep it was to dream of a child weeping by her side.

Lizzie wept no more; she was happy and at rest, and the tears Rosie shed Lizzie's mother could have wiped away had she so chosen. Perhaps the dawning of this thought, half-formed and vague though it was, brought the first ray of light to a darkened spirit. For the first time Martha Finch felt that Lizzie was not really *there*, in the dread silent grave, from whence she never would come home, call to her as her mother might, and where no sound of loving voice could reach her. For the first time the room did not seem so empty, and itself so like a grave; but, as Rosie had exclaimed, almost as though Lizzie were in it still, or had gone but a little way and would be back before very long.

If "climbing sorrow" made its presence felt again, and the old cry echoed in the mother's heart, "I shall go to her, she will not return to me," it was the first time that note of hope and resignation had been even feebly touched, for no resignation had hitherto mingled with her grief at all.

Through that day, as through the preceding one, the lonely woman watched for Rosie, and Rosie never passed. Towards evening the parish doctor entered the Bennets' cottage. The sight recalled to Martha Finch how often

he had passed and repassed her own threshold while Lizzie's life was slowly ebbing beyond the reach of human skill. It was no wonder she should hate the sight of him, she thought. But, this spasm of sudden pain at the fancy of Rosie in her turn ill—perhaps in danger—*that* was wonderful, unaccountable, Mrs. Finch told herself impatiently. And yet she stood at the window until the doctor had gone again, and was standing there still when Mrs. Bennet, with a basket on her arm, stepped out, probably to do some errand that in the ordinary course of things would have been entrusted to her little girl. This confirmation of her fears so far moved Mrs. Finch that she set open her door, intending to watch for her neighbour's return, and with the half-formed resolution of inquiring whether anything serious was the matter.

And now, to a fanciful imagination, it might seem that a wonder came to pass, that a spell was broken, and that, through this voluntary opening of the long-closed door—type of the closed heart—some neighbourly feelings and kindly charities of life came in with the sweet evening air, growing a little chill and autumnal, with the voices of Rosie's children at their play, with the clear pale colours of the evening sky, neighbourly feelings, kindly charities, against which Martha Finch had barred her house and her heart alike for many years. Certain it is that, Mrs. Bennet being long in coming, her next-door neighbour was seen to move with hesitating step down her own slip of garden and turn in at the Bennets' white gate.

The house-door was ajar; there was no one in the room below, and everything was perfectly silent; the boys and their father would not be in for an hour yet. Advancing to the foot of the narrow stair, Mrs. Finch called the child's name, even then pronouncing it in her sternest

tone—one more calculated to give the impression that she had come to complain of Rosie, than to ask what ailed her.

The child's voice answered her at once :

"Who be it? Mother's stepped out, and I'm alone up here."

Finding there was no answer—for Martha Finch, reassured by the tones of the clear childish voice, had half a mind to go away again—Rosie called entreatingly to whoever it was to come up the stairs.

"I can't come down, you know. *Do'ee* now come up and sit a bit."

That "*do'ee* now," in Rosie's coaxing tones, was hard to resist for any one, though certainly its effect had never been tried on Mrs. Finch before. Not that Rosie knew in the least whom she was addressing at the present moment; it mattered so little who it was; some one come to see her—one of her friends—for Rosie had no enemies; that was quite enough for the friendly little soul.

Almost inclined to yield, and indeed in the act of setting her foot upon the lowest stair, Mrs. Finch was startled by the return of Rosie's mother.

"Well, I'm beat!' exclaimed the worthy woman. "It's never *you*, Mis' Finch? I take it kind, I'm sure; and won't you step up and see the child? It's a bit of bad luck, and no mistake! but then our Rosie 'ain't had no bad luck in all her life till now, and we must take trouble in its turn, though it do seem hard for the child to have broke her leg like this."

They were in the upper room by now, for Mrs. Finch had found it awkward to back in the narrow entry, and altogether more dignified to walk straight upstairs since she *had* come, and with Mrs. Bennet talking so fast be-

hind her. Rosie, lying on her little bed, was not half so surprised when she recognised her visitor as her mother had been. To Rosie it seemed so natural that any one, even "Mis' Finch," should be kind. The little girl held out her arms and pulled Martha Finch down to kiss her, at which the astonishment of Mrs. Bennet was comically depicted upon her round good-humoured face.

"Didn't you hear me cry out?" Rosie said. "Mammy says I screeched terrible; but the doctor he up and called me a good little maid. It's a bad pain to break your leg. Did *you* ever do it, Mis' Finch? And me that was to have gone to school that there very day. I'll lose my marks, you know; that *do* come hard, 'cause it ain't my fault. I'd go if I could."

The child talked on, in the fullest assurance that her visitor sympathised with her and liked to hear all there was to tell, but Mrs. Bennet's unconcealed surprise at this event—an event that had never occurred before—was so mortifying to her neighbour, that she very soon took her leave, and, pursued all the way by the friendly speeches of Rosie's mother, returned to her own abode.

"Do'ee now come again," had been the child's last words; but Martha Finch did not go. The autumn days succeeded one another; a cold rain fell slanting across the landscape. Rosie's children got wet through as they tumbled about in the muddy road, splashing themselves in the puddles, and quarrelling worse than ever; and in due course of time the little maid was carried downstairs and settled comfortably near the window, where she could at least look out upon the garden and see who passed. It was from this window that the smiling little face—a trifle pale from pain and long imprisonment within the house—began to greet Martha Finch as she went "up

street" to the shop, or to carry home the needlework by which alone she earned her living; for since her bereavement, she had shrunk from returning to field-work, which would have entailed at least some intercourse, however limited, with those about her.

It was impossible not to return a nod, even a grim smile now and then, when Rosie seemed so certain of the acknowledgment of her friendly signals; when she took to beckoning in an entreating manner it was impossible not to step in for a moment, especially as Rosie was tolerably sure to be alone at such times; for when any of her frequent visitors were with her, she was too much occupied to see Mrs. Finch go by.

Insensibly Martha Finch grew fond of this child, and one day when they were alone together, surprised at a very unusual pettishness of manner, as though something worried or vexed the little creature, generally so placid and so cheery, Martha Finch asked what was the matter now.

"It's along of my children," said Rosie, screwing up her face into a puzzled frown. "Mammy won't let 'em come in here and make a work for her to clean up, and they do be getting all their bad ways again."

She raised herself upon her couch in order to obtain a better view of this small flock once more so neglected, and pressed a round soft cheek against the lattice pane.

"Could one of your brothers go round and let the mothers know that if they choose to send the children to me for two hours in the morning and for two hours in the afternoon, I will take them in, Rose Bennet?" demanded Martha Finch in her shortest and driest tone.

Had the neglected state of the little ones touched her? had the anxiety of Rosie touched her? Or did she only

see here a way of adding to her scanty earnings—a way that would not force her to cross her own threshold or to "neighbour" with others more than she had ever done?

Rosie's large eyes met those of her visitor, and stared at her in unbounded amazement.

"Why, them's same as school hours!"

"Of course; and there would be the same money to pay—the twopence they would have to give down yonder."

For a moment the bewildered expression lingered on Rosie's face; then it was succeeded by a flash of purest pleasure.

"You're going to keep school for 'em! Well! you do be a good kind woman!"

The little arms were thrown about Martha Finch with the gesture she was fast growing used to now, and for days after that it was a sight to see how important was the little maid, with what an air she gave instructions to her youngest brother and sent him backwards and forwards on her messages, with what triumph and delight she heard of the assent of first one and then another neighbour to this new scheme which had its origin in her loving heart, and but for the magic power of her childish sympathy would never have started into life at all.

The Vicar could hardly believe his eyes when two low forms made their appearance in the room that, to tell the truth, was scarcely large enough to accommodate the scholars the zeal of our Rosie had collected; or his ears, when Martha Finch remarked with the utmost coolness that the children were sadly neglected, it was shocking to hear the language they used, and she had thought it might be convenient to the mothers to send them to her, while the trifle paid for them would be convenient to

herself, provided that the Vicar saw no objection to the plan.

Of course he saw none, or forbore to mention it if he did, for the Vicar lives in daily terror of what the sanitary inspectors may say of Martha Finch's school, where there cannot be, by any means, the orthodox amount of cubic feet of air for so many pairs of lungs. It does not so much matter in summer, when the back door is open always, and beyond the scullery there is a peep of low swelling hills, and a nearer one of green trees and pleasant meadows, while the fresh air pours in unimpeded. But it is another thing in winter, when doors are shut; and yet the children, in absolute defiance of sanitary laws, persist in keeping well and rosy. There has been no sickness amongst them yet.

Meantime strangers are apt to remark that the mistress of this roadside infants' school is one of the sternest and most forbidding-looking women it ever was their lot to meet. The children are not afraid of her, however. They hang about the low white gate long before she opens it to admit them to the strip of garden—gay once more with bachelors' buttons and neat with box edging; and when they enter, they do so clinging to her skirts, looking up into her face, and prattling to her fearlessly. There is no startling change in her demeanour; she is a consistent woman, and neighbours almost as little with other women as before. Perhaps the change is deeper, for she will stand sometimes for a quarter of an hour talking seriously with Mr. Bennet across the fence. Rosie is her right hand in the business of the little school, and may run in and out as she will, and happy mothers of living girls are beginning to find out that if they need help or sympathy they may ask both and be sure to find both from Martha

Finch. Her appearance is as respectable as ever; she holds her head high, and in great measure keeps herself to herself still; but the heart-broken look has gone out of her eyes, and the touch of little hands has helped to heal the sore heart of this childless mother.

"No denying it do work well," Mrs. Bennet will sometimes say, "but there's no one only our Rosie as would have thought of such a thing as naming of it to Mis' Finch —her as we thought like to die of grief for her only child; it do beat me to see her a'most brought back to life, as one may say, by other folks' children. Mis' Finch indeed! Our Rosie she don't never see no difference in folks."

Our Rosie is quite unconscious of having done good; she has already forgotten the next-door scholars were ever "her children," and goes blithely on her way, "a very harmless child," and a favourite with all.

A GOLDEN WEDDING.

ON the edge of the common there stood two cottages, each of which chanced at one time to be inhabited by a widow having one child.

At a first glance, to an unobservant eye, the houses may have appeared very much alike. Both were whitewashed, and thatched with straw; both had the usual slip of garden before the door; before both alike stretched the common, golden with blossoming gorse and crossed by the worn track leading to the church, whose gray tints and fine spire showed well against the background of trees which shut in the open space on that side; and over both cottages alike two magnificent oaks, the leafy branches of which met and mingled, threw their friendly shade. But against one wall a rose-bush had been trained, the other was quite bare; in one garden cabbages and potatoes alone showed themselves, the other was gay and sweet with flowers; and in one there lived a girl, in the other a boy.

Polly Pattenden had the rosiest cheeks and the sweetest

temper in the village. Frugal and industrious, she and her mother lived as the rest of their neighbours did, with little other object in life than that of keeping off the parish, earning their daily bread, and being together always. At field-work, or taking in an occasional job of sewing, or employed as an extra hand by one of the well-to-do laundresses in the neighbourhood when a press of work occurred, Polly was busy always, and cheerful and content. As children, James Saunders and Polly Pattenden had played together upon the common, or in the short days of winter had gone home from school together when their companions dropped off one by one at their own doors, leaving these two to take alone the longer walk that brought them to the thatched houses beneath the bare branches of the oak-trees. Even in those early days the sullen temper of Saunders made him many enemies and few friends; of these last Polly was the stanchest always. Her mother used to tell a story of the child when she was quite a little creature. James and his mother had "had words"—truth to say the pair "had words" often, and very loudly—so that when the boy cut his hand severely with the hatchet as he was chopping firewood behind the house, he would not go to his mother for assistance, but to Polly, always at hand to do his bidding, and who, with her unskilful childish fingers, not only bound up the wound, but for a few days waited on her friend, doing all of his daily tasks that her slight strength could accomplish. As soon as he needed her no longer it was Polly's turn to "have words" from James, or rather to have none; for outside his own house the cross-grained temper of the lad showed itself principally in sullen silence.

"You let me alone, will you! I hear nagging enough

at home," he was wont to say; and on this occasion Polly was left to find out only by the impatient way in which he shook her off, and moodily went about his business in the potato-plot or the wood-shed, that the need for her services was at an end, and he wanted her no more. Observant of what passed, good Mrs. Pattenden, just starting off for a day's charing, could not help showing a little indignation.

"The great lout 'ain't so much as a word of thanks for you, my pretty," she exclaimed.

"He don't want me no more just now," says Polly, brightly; "he'll be sure and come to me when he does. Jim likes me better than anybody, mother."

That speech was the key to Polly's whole future life, though no one might have guessed as much in those early years when spring flowers blossomed and faded in Polly's garden, and the gorse was golden all the year round, while James and she grew up together side by side.

Mrs. Saunders, an older woman than her neighbour, and a woman whose temper had been soured and her life embittered by the trials of poverty, that had but left the sweet nature of Polly's mother sweeter still—Mrs. Saunders was the first of the two widows to pass away from the whitewashed houses on the common's edge, and be carried along the path to the churchyard that had been before her eyes for so many years.

Upon that occasion Polly wept more than young Saunders himself. It was so sad, she said, to see the black figure walking alone after the bearers, as the humble procession crossed the common—so sad to think Jim would be all alone in the next house now, with no one to do for him, and no one liking him or great friends with him. How should they like him?

He was steady enough, apprenticed to the village shoemaker and saddler, for both trades were combined in the person of Master Dyke, who kept a modest shop near the turnpike in the very heart of the village. Young Saunders was steady enough, but he had fewer friends than ever. You never knew where to have him, lads of his own age declared; "he would turn that nasty when you least expected it." He was the despair of the curate, still more of "the ladies," because he never could be induced to touch his cap, but walked on defiantly in his sullen dogged way whenever he met them.

"Why should I touch my cap?" he said; "I'm as good as they be."

"'Tain't no trouble to be civil," answers Polly.

Only Polly bore with him. She was ready in a thousand ways to help after his mother's death, performing many a sisterly office for her next-door neighbour, and winning no thanks. She did not look for thanks; she only looked that James should come to her when he really needed anything; that was all the reward Polly cared for. And she had it. Whenever he really had occasion for kind services, young Saunders applied to Polly; whenever the need was past, he shook her off again, just as he had done in their childhood.

Whether Polly liked him from force of habit, whether she liked him for the same reason that makes the most troublesome and the most thankless of her flock the dearest to a mother's heart, who can say? but like him she did; so that, though many pitied her, none were surprised, when, soon after a coffin had left the second cottage door and been borne across the common, James and Polly took the same path together, walked quietly to the old gray church, and were wedded.

One of her friends, venturing to condole with Polly upon the queer temper she would have to put up with, received very much the same answer that the child Polly had once given to her mother.

"He is so lonesome; he must have some one to do for him, and he likes me better than any one; I am sure of that."

It was fortunate that Polly was sure of it, so sure that nothing could make her doubt the fact of James's affection, for her patience and her faithful love were sorely tried.

There were no "words" in the home of young Saunders and his wife. The husband seemed well content. Polly, who knew his ways, was always at hand now. He was no longer obliged to ask for her help even; she was bound to give it, for they two were one. He had set up in business for himself by this time; that is to say, he combined the trade he had learnt with an occasional job of field-work; many people were glad to bring him a pair of shoes to mend, or broken harness that needed restitching. There was a small hamlet on the other side of the common, and the dwellers in that hamlet were not sorry to be spared the longer walk into the village, and to stop short at Saunders's door when they needed the services of a cobbler or saddler. Honest, sober, industrious, what could any woman want more? Yet there was a look in Polly's eyes as though she missed something. She was twenty when they took that walk together to the church, and Saunders three or four years her elder; they were married more than four years before the blessing came that Polly's warm heart had longed for, and children were born to them.

The children worried Saunders. When he was ill-tempered with them, Polly resented it, as she had never

resented temper shown to herself. Every time this happened Saunders appeared amazed, and showed his displeasure by days of dogged silence. When Polly won him to speech at last, he would complain that she set the children first always, and that he was of no account in his own house.

"Stuff!" Polly would answer, in her hearty friendly tones; "there ain't no one so nigh to one as one's own man. What's children compared to the father of 'em? But I can't see 'em ill done by, Jim, and you know it."

On fine summer evenings people from the village came to the common. The boys played cricket there, or sought for glowworms amongst the gorse; on a wooden bench under a thorn-tree the old men sat and talked. At such times Polly liked to stand in the little garden, where, by the way, roses flourished now as well as cabbages, and chat to one or another while her little ones played before the door. Saunders chose to work as long as light lasted, seldom looking up to return a greeting as he sat near the window, wide open, not for the sake of the sweet air, or to enable him to hear the cheerful sounds of laughter and talk going on outside, but simply for the sake of making the most of the failing light. When twilight had fully come he too would stroll out upon the common to smoke his pipe there apart from the rest—an unsociable ill-tempered man.

His ill-temper never affected his wife's spirits.

"It be his way," she said, the click of her knitting pins as she stood at the gate keeping cheerful time to the cheerful music of her voice; "we ain't all made on one pattern; there's them as likes best to be let alone."

If that was what Saunders liked he had it, or as much of it as was compatible with life in a small cottage shared

by a wife and the many little ones whose presence seemed so unwelcome to the jealous moody father. Polly's bright ways had no effect upon him. After they had lived together twenty years he was the same man still, given to fits of temper that held him for days together—a sullen, silent, cross-grained fellow, as he had ever been. Shortly after the birth of their last child, and before the mother's strength was fully restored, Polly's husband really did for a time require all her care, and even he might have been satisfied with the way in which the children were set aside for his sake then.

It was a wet season. With the obstinacy that was ingrained in him Saunders had persisted in finishing a job of out-door work, even when the other men employed had all knocked off on account of bad weather, and when he was under no manner of obligation to continue. It was therefore not to be wondered at that he came home through pouring rain one evening, and sinking into the chair set ready for him by the pale wife with her newborn infant in her arms, complained to Polly that he was "took bad."

He held out his hand to her, and, when she took it, drew her near to him, seeming to cling to her in a helpless sort of way that went to her heart. To transfer the little creature in her arms to those of one of the elder children was the work of a moment, and to devote herself night and day to the sick husband who needed her was only what might have been expected of the Polly who all their lives had been at hand when James called upon her, and all their lives had been ready to respond to the call.

Severe rheumatic fever was the result of Saunders's obstinacy. The parish doctor declared it was good

nursing that saved his patient's life; and as long as he needed her Saunders craved for Polly's presence, and suffered her to spend her hardly recovered strength in attending upon him.

How she contrived to get on as well as she did with all those little ones of hers—one of them a babe—was a secret known only to our heroine herself; but she was happy in the fact that her husband wanted her. Her eldest girl was a wonderfully helpful child, they had good friends in their next-door neighbours, who were always ready to lend a hand, his club supplied the patient with nourishment, the club doctor of course charged nothing, and the family won through the hard time, Polly hardly knew how. Indeed that time was not so hard to her as the one that immediately followed.

It was early spring when Saunders first began to get about again. The brown shiny leaves on the twin oaks were only just beginning to uncurl themselves, and there was as yet no blossom on the thorn, only, as the lads say, "kissing was not out of fashion," for the gorse was still golden here and there. Spring winds blew keenly across the common, and Polly was glad to be able to devote herself a little more to the baby, who was not thriving as she should. It was a pretty child, the prettiest of all her flock Polly thought, and soon picked up again under the mother's tender care. But as baby grew fat and rosy and began to laugh and crow, Saunders grew morose and sullen; the cloud of his queer temper settled down once more; he had no further need just then for his wife's services, and shook her off in the old fashion.

He would not, he said, be nagged at (as if Polly ever nagged!); he would not be worried or fussed over, but would go in and out as he liked, and work too, if he chose.

He scowled at the infant in its mother's arms, and asked why Polly also did not work—surely she could go out charing now *he* no longer wanted her at home.

Yes, Polly could go out charing; indeed, she had no choice, since the few jobs of cobbling and harness-mending, which were all Saunders was as yet fit for, would not suffice to maintain the family, though the elder children were by this time bringing in a trifle towards their own support. Baby was left in the charge of little Ellen, the woman next door keeping a friendly eye upon them both; the others trotted off to school daily and were safe enough there, so that the mother could be easy as to them all when she went out washing, or to field-work, as she had done twenty years ago before Jim and she were wedded. Through all her life Polly never wanted for friends; she found many to employ her.

And then the may blossomed and the summer came. The shade of the twin oaks, which had grown up together as Polly and James themselves had done, grew deep and broad, making a cool paradise before the doors of the two cottages, beyond which the turf of the common, all a-blaze now with the golden gorse, was brown and parched. Saunders passed his time as he chose. If a chance job came his way he did it well and honestly, but he went no more to field-work; he had not attempted that since his illness. Perhaps he felt it beyond him, perhaps it had struck him that Polly worked hard enough for both. At all events, her earnings kept the children and herself, and what did he want more than his shoemaking, or mending rather, brought in? It was certain that the rheumatism had settled in his joints, and that he was not yet, probably never would be, the same man as of old. At five-and-forty his hair was turning gray already, his sullen moody

temper helped also to make him appear older than he was. His fancy for solitude, or it might be more exact to say his fancy for not being troubled with other people, especially for not being troubled with his own children, grew upon him ; but it was his wife who, by an unfortunate remark, strengthened that other idea of his that was also growing and taking shape daily—the idea that just as he could do without his family, so they were well able to do without him.

The farmer who used to employ Saunders came one day with an offer of work to the cottage, and Saunders refused it at once. His wife said nothing at the time, but she remonstrated afterwards.

"You used to like well enough to go a-field," she said to him, "and it be pleasant weather."

Saunders grunted : it was his usual reply to Polly's remarks, and he did not always make even so much of a reply as that.

"You might do *something*, you know, Jim," Polly went on, dandling the baby in her arms, though baby could now stand alone and the arms that held her were weary enough; "you might do *something;* now and again I do be thinking as you *ought* to go a-field while it's nice outdoors."

He looked at her with a glance of sulky indignation, and then down again at the horse-collar he was stitching.

"To be sure," said Polly, nodding her head, "I see that. But that ain't much. Why, it's no more than would keep yourself, and there's the children to look to. If you was living alone them mending jobs would be all you'd want to do, but you ain't living alone. Here's baby, ain't there, my precious?" by which, fond as she

was of her husband, Mrs. Saunders did not mean him, but the healthy, happy, crowing morsel of humanity in her arms. She even forgot herself so far as to hold baby towards her father, when of course the child seized a handful of Saunders' beard and tugged at it lustily.

Saunders got up and went out of the house, nearly falling over Ted and Johnny, who were at play upon the door-step; he boxed the ears of the one nearest to him, but Polly forbore to take the part of her offspring when the urchin ran to her sobbing.

"Father's put out," she said; "you hadn't ought to have got in his way."

That they "didn't ought to be in father's way" was a lesson impressed upon all Polly's children from their tenderest years.

By-and-by, when supper was ready, she went herself to the door to call her husband, whom she fully expected to see sauntering upon the common or sitting beneath the thorn. He was not there, however. Instead of composing his ruffled feelings with a pipe amongst the gorse, Saunders had gone a little way down the road leading to the village. A painter and glazier had a house there. He was a well-to-do man; the house was a two-storied one, and had a tiled roof. A long shed beside it gave evidence of the business of the occupier; paint-pots stood here and there amongst a litter of shavings, and great splashes of paint adorned the boards of the shed. Beyond it was a smaller one, empty now, and the wood-work fast rotting. It was very small, little more than a cupboard. Dell's business had outgrown his premises since the days when this small shed represented them all. It was not a very attractive-looking object, but Saunders stood silently contemplating it for a good half-hour before he turned

away and went home to supper. During the course of the meal he asked his wife whether she had any money.

"I've got some: do you want it?" asked Polly, who recognised no *meum* and *tuum* in their possessions, and was ready at once to rise and fetch her store.

Saunders detained her.

"It be yours," he said, "mind what I tell you: the money you earn be yours and the little uns'."

"Well to be sure!" ejaculated Polly, laughing. She thought no more of the matter then, though later she recalled her husband's words, and the strange expression with which he had regarded her.

After supper Saunders finished the horse-collar. It was almost dark when he had done, as dark as it ever is on a fine summer night; yet he went once more down the road and took another look at Dell's shed.

The following morning he asked Dell to let it to him. The man laughed.

"What do you want it for?" he said.

"I'm after a quiet place to work in—a place where there ain't no women nor children."

Dell could understand that: he suffered from his wife's tongue himself, and he did not know Polly.

"I should not know what rent to put upon the shed," he said. "You're free to work there if you choose to put it in repair; there's a hole in the roof now."

It appeared, however, that Saunders was bent upon a place of his own, which the shed would not be if he used it only during Dell's pleasure; so after a few more words a trifling rent was agreed upon, and Saunders, who could turn his hand to almost any job he cared to do, began at once to put his new holding into repair. The task occupied him several days. He said nothing of it to his

wife, but then, as he very seldom said anything at all to her, that was the less surprising. Dell was amused to notice that his tenant was fixing a stove in the shed, besides putting up a flap which in the day could be let down, forming a board on which to work, and at night acted as a shutter.

"You mean to use the place winter and summer?" he asked.

"I do," said Saunders.

Ay, for many a summer and many a winter, till the snows of old age should lie thick upon Polly's head and upon his own; but it is just possible that when he answered that question in the affirmative Saunders did not know how true his answer was to prove.

His task completed, Saunders appeared with a pair of wheels, as the people call it, that is to say, a hand-truck, before his own door, and proceeded to bring out and place upon the truck one of the beds from the upper room—a small bed in which Ted and Johnny were in the habit of sleeping. He also caught up a chair and one or two other articles.

"What be after now?" demanded Polly, coming to the door in surprise; she had hitherto supposed the job he had been engaged upon was for Dell, and to be paid for.

"Them mending jobs would be all I need to do if I was to live alone; you said so yourself. I be going to live alone," said Saunders.

"For a while," suggested Polly, not willing even then to contradict him.

"Ay, for a while."

Thus the cobbler set up his stall. It is probable that he hardly owned to himself that it was for life—probable that he had some dim notion of coming back when the

children should be grown up, or older, any way, and less troublesome. Polly always maintained that he kept, through all the years that followed, as faithful a watch over her as she did over him, and that, if ever she had needed help, or her earnings had failed for the support of herself and the children, he would have returned to her at once. Why else should he have settled so near to them? she demanded. It may have been true, or it may have been a fiction of Polly's loving heart. Saunders may even have intended to return home every morning, and let each day slip by, until the intention and the non-fulfilment of it alike grew to be the habit of a lifetime. Certainly he never did go home.

It is not to be supposed that Polly submitted quietly to this new whim. At first she did; but as the days went by she sought her husband to remonstrate with him. The neighbours began to talk. Anything like separation or prolonged quarrel between man and wife is so exceedingly rare in that class, that it was no wonder people talked. Polly went to the cobbler's stall. She had the rosy laughing little Polly in her arms. Saunders was at work upon a pair of boots. When he saw his wife, he swept the boots and all his paraphernalia off the board, and fastened it shutterwise. The door was locked. Polly rattled the handle, baby beat with her tiny fists upon the door. There was no response. Presently Dell came out and looked at the mother and child.

"What a strange whim!" he said.

"It be," said Polly; "he wasn't never like other folk. When he wants me he'll let me know. Good-day to you, Mr. Dell."

She spoke bravely, and went bravely home again. Her husband was not to be blamed, not in her presence at

least. It was a whim; some folks liked to be let alone. But who knows whether her heart ached or no under the smiling face she wore?

Saunders got work enough. He was a good workman always, and if at first every one brought their boots and shoes and broken harness to him more out of curiosity than anything else, and because of the nine days' wonder he had made in the place, they continued to bring them because the work was well done, so that the cobbler's stall grew to be an institution in the village. It was a strange trade for a man to take up in the prime of life, his neighbours remarked, but then Saunders had been prematurely aged by the rheumatic fever, and that made a difference. The clergyman came to remonstrate with him for deserting his wife; the ladies from the Manor House, good kind old ladies, who in those days went about meddling in all the concerns of the cottagers, and felt that they had every right to meddle since Providence had called them to the enjoyment of greater riches and a higher station—they too went to Saunders.

The house of every Englishman is his castle; so also is his wooden shed half built by his own hands. Saunders put up his shutter in the face of the clergyman, and in the ladies' faces as well. When Polly heard of their interference she upheld her sulky husband; her love even framed a new and plausible excuse for him.

"It's a free land," she said; "if the Squire himself took a fancy to go and live over against his own wife somewheres, just as Saunders have done by me, there isn't no one as would say a word, leastwise till the lady herself up and complained of it. Folks don't hear me complain. It's all along of my man's thought not to be burdensome. He ain't fit for nothing as yet but them

mending jobs, they just about keep him, and he won't be after eating the children's bread from 'em, so he's took himself off for a while. That's what he done it for, but he weren't never one to talk; he liked always for to be let alone. No one 'ain't no call to meddle with him till I asks 'em to."

As for Polly she got on better without her husband than she had of late done with him, for during and after his long illness he had been a serious burden and drag upon her. Now all went well. The children throve, work was plentiful, and the mother continued to be blessed with good health. As soon as the clergyman seemed quite to have made up his mind to leave Saunders alone, he began to go to church again, as though to prove what a thoroughly respectable member of society he was. Week by week this man might have been seen sitting up in the gallery, from which he could see, if he chose to cast his eyes in their direction, his deserted wife and little ones. The church then was divided below into the high square pews common at that time. On the whitewashed walls hung a text or two painted in black letters upon large cardboard placards edged with black. The cushions in such of the pews as had cushions were moth-eaten; there was no vestry; the clergyman was in the habit of putting on his surplice, and of changing it for the black gown in which he preached, in the lower part of the belfry where one cracked bell was hung; in the gallery a bass-viol and two fiddles performed as orchestra when the hymns were sung on Sundays, but these were by-and-by replaced by a hand-organ, that ground out the psalm tunes to the admiration of the villagers. The old gray church looks outside the same to-day as it did when Polly and Jim were married, but

within there have been many changes. The changes came one by one, slowly, with the slowly-passing years, but Saunders watched them all from that corner seat in the gallery. He saw the fiddles and bass-viol depart, and with a few moody words joined in the indignation meeting held upon the occasion; he, with the rest of the congregation, grew to be proud of the hand-organ in its turn; he saw the neat little vestry built, and the old long bricked-over priest's door reopened into the chancel; he was present on the first Sunday that the clergyman—not his old friend, but a new-comer—ascended the pulpit in his surplice and preached as good a sermon in a white robe as he could have done in a black gown. Many, very many sermons from that pulpit did Saunders the cobbler hear as the years rolled by, but whether he understood or followed them or gathered any meaning from the flow of words may be doubted. Neither he nor his wife were scholars; their children went to a dame's school, looked after and almost entirely supported by the ladies of the Manor, who gave the children little scarlet cloaks and warm jackets. In the course of time a National School was opened, with a certificated mistress, but it would be for Polly's grandchildren to reap the benefit of the new order of things. Saunders used to sleep through the sermons; they were a soothing and comfortable part of the service which he would have missed had it been omitted. His whole religion consisted in "going to church," and he naturally left it in the same place, where week by week he took it up, at the church-door.

Time passed; the nine days' wonder came to an end; indeed a new generation were growing up who knew nothing of the story. There was Saunders in the cob-

bler's stall, an honest hardworking old man, who mended a pair of boots as well as any one in the country-side, and there was old Mrs. Saunders up on the common. Few people connected the two in their own minds; there were many Saunderses in the village, it was a common enough name thereabouts.

One opportunity Polly's husband did have of returning to her had he chosen to do so—a time when such a return would have made no talk, but appeared only natural. Two years after he had left her, Ted, the second child of the pair, fell ill and died. Ellen was sent for her father then. The child came back weeping.

"He clapped the shutter to, mother; he didn't say nothing, he but clapped the shutter to," was all the report she had to bring.

Her mother also said nothing. She pressed her lips tightly together, and went about her sad duties in silence. In silence too, she, with her surviving little ones beside her, followed the boy's coffin across the common. After they had all come home again, she made the remark that on that day two-and-twenty years ago father and she were wedded. Whether it was in memory of her wedding-day or of little Ted's funeral day, who knows? but from that time Polly took up the habit of making a mark below the window-sill at each recurrence of the anniversary, till at last this grew to be so much a habit and nothing more, that she did it almost mechanically, and without attaching much meaning to the act.

The odd thing about all this was that the husband and wife saw each other constantly. Polly could not go to the shop without passing the cobbler's stall. Dell moved from the neighbourhood, and his house, after changing hands many times, came into the possession of the new

parish doctor, to whom Saunders continued to pay his trifle of rent. There was a new doctor, a new parson, a new squire even, and the gentle meddlesome old ladies were seen no more, but had died long since, leaving tender recollections behind them that kept their memories green. There was a new school, and new people at the shop, but Saunders lived on in the wooden hut, and Polly beneath the oak-trees.

A cheery lighthearted old woman was Polly Saunders, though the bands of hair lying on her brow were white with the snows of time. Her children had grown up around her. Ellen's husband took the cottage next door, and that became full of grandchildren. Polly had a merry word and a laugh for them all. The old thorn upon the common, old as it was, blossomed every spring with the same sweet flowers it had borne in its youth, and perhaps in Polly's heart there was a perpetual childhood of cheerfulness and love, ready to respond to any call made upon it. There are such natures. But this dear old goody, in the black coal-scuttle bonnet and high pattens of half a century ago, did not look much like a heroine.

One day in hopping-time, when the next-door cottage was empty, and Polly's youngest grandchild, a little creature only just able to stand alone, had been left in her charge, the old woman, whose seventy years had not yet bowed her frame any more than they had quenched her spirits, took the babe on her arm and set off through the village. She went to the shop. It was years now since she had so much as turned her head that way when passing the cobbler's stall. If any one had thought about it, which no one ever did, they might not unnaturally have come to the conclusion that Polly herself had for-

gotten the existence of her husband as much as his children had done, and was herself as oblivious of the tie between them as all her neighbours were.

While she was examining the goods upon the shop counter, the baby standing on the floor and holding by its grandmother's gown, some one present observed that old Saunders had had a fit of some kind.

"A fit," said Polly, still turning over the print dresses, and drawing pieces of them between her fingers in order to feel their texture; "there's a many kind of fits; mustard is good, mustard clapped on to the back of the head; but their ain't many as gets over it, not so as to be themselves again." Then, with some sudden recollection: "Saunders, did you say? why it be my man!" Polly caught up the babe and went straight to the cobbler's stall.

"Well I never!" exclaimed the mistress of the shop, standing in the doorway and shielding her eyes with her hand as she watched the old woman walk briskly away, "wonders will never cease. I've heard tell they were man and wife."

The doctor was in the shed with Saunders when Polly entered.

"It's well you came," he said; "with every one out in the hop-garden there is nobody to attend to this man. It is fortunate I lived so near myself. Can you spare a day, Mrs. Saunders?"

"I be come to fetch him home, doctor," said Polly.

"Home?" The doctor stared; then remembered that he too, like the woman at the shop, had once heard that Saunders the cobbler and old Polly, living on the common, were man and wife.

"It is the best thing you can do," said the doctor.

Just then Saunders recovered consciousness. He

turned his head, upon which the few scanty locks were gray, towards the door.

"Polly!"

"I be here, Jim."

Of course she was there; he wanted her again at last, and she was ready.

The shaking hand of the old man came out to draw her near, much as the hand of the young man had done in the days of the fever, but the mind of Saunders was confused.

"She 'ain't growed a mite," he said, looking at the baby, and mistaking it for the one he had seen last in his wife's arms, thirty years before; "she 'ain't growed a mite, and I'd been fancying I was a goodish while away from you all," he chuckled feebly.

"Lor' bless you! this here bean't ours; it be Ellen's youngest," Polly answered cheerily; "a rare fine houseful Ellen have to be sure. Seven of 'em at home, two out in service, and she have one in the churchyard alongside of little Ted."

The doctor summoned such help as could be obtained at that busy season, and Saunders was carried home.

"I always knowed he'd turn to me when he wanted anything," said the old woman, bustling about to make him comfortable; "he never liked no one but me, Jim didn't. It was just a whim of his to live alone for a while, doctor. You see he be come back when he wants me, he be."

Not at all like a heroine this merry old woman, fidgeting in and out, now after a pillow for her husband's head, now for a rug to throw over his feet, now snatching little Polly up in her arms and giving her a hearty kiss, and talking all the time.

"The shaking hand of the old man came out to draw her near."

"Lor', how queer things do come about," she said. "I mind, doctor, that this here's our wedding-day—fifty years ago it is, too. See them marks as I've kept on the old boards under the window-sill; I began to keep 'em regular when Ted died. We 'ain't lost ne'er a one but little Ted; the Lord's been that good to us as we never buried but one."

"We!" as though they had been together all the time.

Nothing of a heroine perhaps with her "How queer things do come about!" but the doctor was aware of a mist before his eyes. He had always known the story, and now recalled it in all its particulars. He stood looking out at the gray church in the distance, and the masses of yellow gorse near at hand.

"Fifty years ago," he said; "then this is a golden wedding."

"Eh?"—Polly put one hand to her ear—"golden? Ay, to be sure, the gorse you do be meaning; it be as yaller as gold, that's true enough. But 'tain't never without a bloom on it; kissing's never out of fashion, doctor, you know."

There must have been a perennial bloom in Polly's heart, that her golden deeds of love and fidelity to this broken-down man had never been, would be never out of fashion either. The doctor walked smiling away; the wish in his heart was that the old couple might be spared to live together for a few years.

They are together now, at all events. Polly need have no fear of being shaken off again, for her husband will need her care as long as he lives. The presence of the children does not annoy him now; he is particularly fond of little Polly, and likes to have her climbing about his

knees. His children and grandchildren are all good to the old people. They make a lady and gentleman of them, Polly says gleefully, and their landlord will take no rent; she has nothing to do but wait on her old man and tend him lovingly. "I always knowed he'd be glad of me some day," she says.

As has been said, neither Polly nor her husband were ever scholars, but their grandchildren have the benefit of a more liberal education than even the dame's school afforded to their parents, and the children come in daily to read the Bible to the old couple. Saunders likes to listen, and who dare say the holy lessons fall unheeded? The old thorn upon the common has a stem gnarled and twisted, and branches that seem fit for firewood only, and yet it is crowned each spring with blossoms. Who dare say that faith, hope, and love may not blossom even now in the heart of this cross-grained old fellow, that after thirty years of separation a loving wife brought home again upon their golden wedding-day?

MISS OLIVE'S BOYS.

IN the neighbourhood of one of those old-world hamlets that, nestling under the Sussex Downs, lie remote from the stir and tumult of this busy age, and seem to have stood still for centuries, there is situated a certain picturesque house, once the residence of the lords of the Manor, and still in the possession of a member of the same family, whose ancestor laid the first stone more than two hundred years ago, though the Manor lands have long been parted with, or dwindled down to the few acres of park-like meadow surrounding the house on all sides.

An old house of course. There is not a new building in the neighbourhood. The modern builder and contractor has not yet penetrated here. The straggling village street, boasting the quaintest of inns—in its day a house of call for pilgrims, so runs the tale—a few outstanding farmhouses of Kentish rag, here and there a labourer's cottage, as ancient as everything else about the place, suffice now, as they sufficed ten years ago,

and for many a ten years before that, for the accommodation of the population; a quiet people, living as their fathers lived, grumbling not a little at steam machinery, which is only now beginning to make its appearance amongst them, content with old ways and old manners, content, too, with one another, and rarely forming new ties—one proof of which is the paucity of names in the parish. More than half the families have the same name. In the churchyard whole rows of gravestones are inscribed with but one patronymic.

This is not uncommon in country churchyards in many an out-of-the-way corner of England; but, as a rule, the names of such frequent occurrence on the moss-grown stones have no longer living representatives in the adjoining villages: to hear the old titles you must go to a new world, for the descendants of those that sleep so quietly down there amongst the roots of the yew trees are at work on Australian farms or amongst Canadian settlers.

Here, however, in this village, dominated by the old house that, built upon a slope of the hill-side, looks down upon the hamlet, and has seen so little change in it through the years that have given that dark tinge to the stone of the house itself, and have spread that kindly mantle of ivy on its walls, the names of the dead and of the living remain so much the same that, having just seen his death recorded on the worn stone, setting forth how he departed this life at the ripe age of eighty-four, to a whimsical imagination it might be startling to meet Jonathan Finn whistling cheerily as he guides his team along the steep-ploughed land; or to meet him yet again, a chubby round-faced urchin, playing truant from the school; or yet again, a clove-pink between his lips, escorting some blushing maiden home from church on Sunday afternoons.

The old church, with windows cut out of the chalk—a small, dark, narrow church, yet boasting a fine carved pulpit—is as full of Finns, Sunday by Sunday, as the graveyard beneath its walls is full of Finns all the year round. Does Lettice Finn, her eyes cast demurely upon her book, but thinking more of the pink ribbon on her bonnet, and perhaps not quite unconscious that the soft tint in her pretty cheeks rivals the new ribbon in colour—does she think of the other Lettice, who died an old woman long ago, and whose mouldering bones lie beneath the west wall, close under the grotesque figure carved in stone that is the chief curiosity of the place, and that visitors come from far and near to see?

The old Lettice was young once, and wore pink ribbons too. The dim church has seen a whole generation—nay, more than one—of Lettices; but little the young girl recks of that; it is the turn of the living to-day, the dead sleep quietly under the yew.

The dark foliage shades the window near which Lettice sits, though the sunshine is bright out of doors, and the air warm and still. The voice of the preacher, speaking of the fashion of this world that passes away, might as well be addressed to the silent congregation outside under the grassy mounds and moss-covered stones, as to the sleepy congregation in the ancient worm-eaten seats, where a young Jonathan Finn is slyly cutting his name just as his dead grandfather cut the selfsame letters years and years ago. Young Jonathan seems the only person awake in all the church—the only person besides Lettice, whose mind is too much occupied with the new bonnet to permit her to feel drowsy even at the Sunday afternoon service, the sleepiest hour in the week.

But presently there passed over the congregation an

almost imperceptible movement: it might have suggested the image of a "wave of shadow" passing over standing corn, or the tremulous waving of grass stirred momentarily by a faint breeze sweeping across the graves outside. Several of the women and girls turned their heads, a man or two took out a red cotton handkerchief and mopped his brow with it, the preacher half paused, then resumed his sermon in a louder tone, and the boys, without exception, smiled broadly. Every one seemed awake, and suddenly to have become interested in the service—or in something else.

It was only Miss Olive from "the House" who had come into the porch; and then, with shy faltering step, as though ashamed of her late entrance, had advanced a step or two up the narrow aisle, and finally seeing a vacant place on one of the boys' benches had gone no farther, but sank into the seat beside young Jonathan.

Now "the House" pew was at the top of the church, next to that of the rectory. Miss Judith Mortimer, who had involuntarily turned her head when others did, and then faced sternly the other way, waiting to frown at Olive until she should pass her and take her own place, finding that she waited in vain, turned her head again to frown at the young girl where she sat amongst the boys. The parson's sister could not, however, catch Olive's eyes—big glorious eyes they were, the only beauty then of the brown face, that had, however, to a discerning vision, the promise of beauty yet to come—she was listening too intently to the sermon, or if not listening, was certainly looking too earnestly right up into the face of the Rev. Julius Mortimer, for anything to divert her attention. And yet, the next moment, when Miss Judith's glance no longer rested upon her, truth compels me

to confess that Miss Olive not only stooped her head to admire the letters Jonathan Finn had cut upon the old bench, but, taking his knife from him, far from confiscating that piece of property, as it was the bounden duty of a Sunday-school teacher to have done, used it to deepen one of the letters, and give a more artistic flourish to the capital F, returning it with a sly smile to the happy urchin beside her.

A few weeks ago this girl had been a stranger to them all. Her father, the present owner of the old Manor House, had for long turned his back upon the secluded home of his ancestors, and, immersed in the world of politics, lived almost entirely in London, or, when he did leave it, sought for change of scene and refreshment of over-taxed energies in foreign lands.

If he had but known it, both lay ready at his own door. The health-giving breezes sweeping across the Downs, towards which the face of the old house was turned, might surely have blown the cobwebs from the brain of even a country member, on whose wider patriotism "local interests" were a dead weight. The endless changes in the scene as cloud shadows swept over the soft undulations of the thyme-covered grass, whereon South Down mutton was leisurely reaching perfection; the boundless view stretching to the silvery streak near the horizon, might have offered variety enough to a wearied man, and offered with it a peace and serenity no other place than this sylvan spot, where it was even possible to forget the pushing age we live in, was so well calculated to afford.

The indescribable charm and ever-changeful monotony of the lonely downs, the crest of which could be reached in a few minutes from the Manor House, was, however,

fully appreciated by Olive. As a very little child she had been here once before, and had remembered it all her life, with a haunting sense of having once inhabited a freer world, a more innocent and imaginative world, than that of the school where she had passed her motherless girlhood. She had a distinct remembrance of the strange forms the shadows took as passing clouds threw them on the grass, of fairy rings, of a lonely wild expanse, where earth and sky seemed to touch on every side, and the whole universe to hold only her little trembling self. Also of the simple homely life of the village, where she used to go with her nurse to drink tea at the cottages of old servants of the family, and of the white church, the first she ever entered. She remembered being afraid of the quaint grotesque figure carved on the west wall, and dreaming of it at night. But her chief recollections were of the Downs themselves, of the cowslips she gathered there, and the long warm summer afternoons spent upon the hills.

Owing to some untoward circumstances, the girl had left school at least a year before the time fixed for her to enter into society—indeed, she was scarcely more than sixteen; too young, the fashionable aunt who had undertaken to introduce her declared, for presentation at Court; too unformed, as yet, to be allowed to "show." She must be hidden somewhere or other till the lanky girlish form had acquired softness and roundness, till the somewhat muddy complexion had cleared.

This interregnum between school-life and the plunge into the vortex of dissipation had occurred at an inconvenient time for Olive's father. It was the height of a parliamentary season, and with a view to hide her as he had been bidden, as well as with a view to getting her

safely off his hands, he had sent her down to the country under the charge of her own old nurse.

No better cosmetic than the air of the Sussex Downs. The dark cheek of Olive, that had flushed so angrily as her aunt looked at her through her eyeglass and passed judgment upon her, was fast growing clear, while an open-air life, in place of the confinement of her Clapham school, was fast giving her the beauty that comes of perfect health.

When first they reached the Manor, there was an unused uninhabited aspect about the place, which nurse found oppressive, but which did not oppress Olive in the least. The iron gate creaked as it was swung back to admit the fly from the nearest station, fully seven miles away. It is not without satisfaction that I record there is still no station nearer, though it is ten years since that fly crawled along the lanes, and passing through the old-world village—where no one was too busy to pause and look after it as it went—came out on to the chalky winding road leading to the Manor.

The old servant in charge—a Finn, of course—sighed as she showed them through the empty rooms. She remonstrated feebly when Olive flung back the drawing-room shutters and admitted the sunshine upon the faded carpet and worn chintz. But Olive, rejoicing in the consciousness of being mistress in her father's house, would not be dictated to. Moreover, she would have some younger face about her than that of Martha Finn. Nurse fully agreed with her darling, actuated perhaps by the consideration that a younger person than herself would find it easier to "tear about after Miss Olive;" and that, were she provided with such an attendant, Martha and nurse might keep each other company in

the old-fashioned still-room looking out upon the back premises, where they could sit at their ease and talk over old times.

Now and then, in the first days after her arrival at the Manor, it amused Olive to listen to the talk of the two women—to hear of the glories of the old place when the lords of the Manor flourished, traditions of which time had been faithfully handed down from one Finn to another. On the two or three rainy days that succeeded her coming, no better amusement offered itself. But she soon grew impatient for the free out-of-door life she had promised herself. Was there not before her the awful vision of Aunt Ellen and London drawing-rooms?

It would be only wise to waste no more than could be helped of this space of free breathing-time, and of being her own mistress. The thorough enjoyment of a long idle holiday was the girl's object, such a holiday as in her life of boarding-school training and tutoring she had never known till now—at least, since those far-off days in early childhood, the memory of which had lingered with her all these years.

Rain dashed against the windows facing the Downs across which the storm swept; the low clouds appeared to touch the outline of the hills; the wind sighed round the house. To the astonishment of nurse and Martha, as they sat croaking together in the gloomy light of that rainy afternoon, Miss Olive appeared before them envoloped in a waterproof cloak, and demanded to be told the name of the girl who had been mentioned to her as suitable for her purpose, and also to be told where she lived.

"The fashion of this world passeth away," Martha was saying in her mournful tones just at the moment the door

opened. Olive's question cut short the good woman's moralising.

It was Lettice Finn Martha had thought of as a good girl able to wait on Miss Olive, and deserving of such promotion; and in possession of the name and of explicit directions as to where to find its owner—directions that had need to be explicit in order to insure the discovery of the right Lettice among so many—the little mistress started alone for the village, wilfully refusing either to send the garden-boy on the errand, or to take nurse out into the rain.

"The fashion of this world passeth away." Olive seemed haunted by the words that had caught her ear as she opened the still-room door; she found herself repeating them over and over again as she made her way down the chalky road to the hamlet. The words suited well with the gray afternoon; the world seemed passing away altogether in rain and wind, as the dark clouds rolled overhead. But Olive enjoyed the storm, and enjoyed the wild wet weather. How much better this was than dreary afternoons at Clapham, when the girls could not go out, or rather were not allowed to do so: for what harm did the rain do any one? If Olive could have a school conducted on her own principles, the pupils should be trained to go out in all weathers; with waterproofs, of course, and thick shoes, and petticoats short enough not to be draggled in mud such as that through which she was gaily stepping now. A cart-horse, standing in the shelter of a shed, looked at her with such a mild benevolent expression on his wise brown face that she stopped to pat him, and so became aware of the small boy in charge of him, and asked his name, laughing at him for sheltering from a few drops of wet—an accusa-

tion he indignantly denied, showing her, in proof of the truth of his denial, the turnips he was chopping, or that he ought to have been chopping, in the corner of the shed; whereupon Olive must needs chop turnips, and then take the lad with her to show the way.

If all this was pleasanter than the prospect in life upon which she had finally turned her back, how much pleasanter was it than that which lay before her! Olive hated to think of Aunt Ellen and her fashionable acquaintances, of the conventionalities of society, the fine dresses of which she would have to take care, and the fine manners she must perforce require. Where was the good of it all? "The fashion of this world passeth away," she repeated to herself.

They turned in at the churchyard gate; it was, so the boy said, a short cut. Olive wanted to find the strange figure that used to terrify her when a child, but she did not know where to look for it. Her ideas grew oddly confused; she had been so certain it was near the yew-tree, and here was her small guide pointing it out to her on the west wall. Olive stooped to read the letters on the worn tombstone just below.

"You bad little boy!" she exclaimed, laughing, "you have brought me to the wrong Lettice Finn after all. Do you think I want an old woman of ninety to scramble out of her grave and tear over the Downs with me?"

"That there were my great-granny," said the boy.

"The fashion of this world passeth away," Olive thought again, as, with a momentary shade of gravity in her manner, she stepped through the wet grass to the path; not only the fashion of this world in courts and cities, but in quiet humble lives, in out-of-the-way secluded spots like this. She would enjoy life while she

could, be happy in her own way while that was possible.

Lettice found it a pleasant thing to take service with Miss Olive, who had not two ways of speaking to her fellow-creatures, and was soon quite as intimate with her little maid as she had ever been with the young ladies at Clapham. Nurse warned her that such familiarity would be the ruin of the girl, and that she should be taught to keep her distance, but that was exactly what Olive could not teach: nor did harm ever come of her sweet frank ways, either with Lettice or any of the people in the village, who soon learnt to idolise her. Though she liked best to roam over the Downs, and in fine weather would spend whole hours there, making Lettice lie beside her on the warm dry turf and watch how the white clouds, drifting across the sky, had the strange effect, in that wild lonely place, of making it seem as though the Downs themselves were moving; yet Olive spent a good part of her time in the hamlet below. It amused her to go in and out of the cottages, where the old people had a free independent way of speaking that was exactly to her mind, and prevented her ever feeling in the way. But it was in the school that she was perhaps the greatest favourite. The children grinned from ear to ear when the slight figure appeared in the doorway; the patient mistress looked up with a smile as she asked Miss Olive to "take a class."

The first time this occurred Olive was fairly puzzled. What was she to do with a class if she did "take it?" What did the phrase mean? With not the wildest idea of what was expected of her, and her large eyes dancing with suppressed merriment, she accepted the book put into her hands, and took the place pointed to her.

"Come, begin," she said demurely, and forthwith a fine

flow of Sussex dialect greeted her astonished ears, as the children read in turn from the reading-book in her hand. Olive soon detected that they were pronouncing words only, with not the faintest idea of attaching any meaning to them; the total suppression of the letter H was moreover too much for her, and she fairly burst out laughing. The children joined in the laugh. It was always the same, whatever lesson might be in progress; when Olive made her appearance that lesson ended in a laugh. The children were best pleased when she came in just before breaking-up, so that they could crowd round her after school was over, and follow her to the very gate of the Manor. There was soon not a child in the place whose name she did not know. Lettice rather wondered at the taste of her young mistress, and was perhaps a little jealous of her many favourites. As for Miss Judith Mortimer, she shook her head over the young girl.

Miss Judith disapproved of Olive, who indeed, it must be confessed, was not quite on her best behaviour at the rectory. She did not recognise the right of Miss Judith to lecture her, or to interfere with her in any way, and in her childish dignity resented all such interference.

"That girl is allowed to run quite wild; she is doing incalculable harm to the school-children, and will be the ruin of Lettice Finn," said Miss Judith to her brother.

The puzzled man looked up from his sermon.

"What harm do they do?" he asked. "I meet them everywhere about. It is better perhaps than if the young lady were to wander alone over the country."

"I saw her with my own eyes leading one of the farm horses at Dunk's farm to water, and Lettice standing by laughing," said Miss Judith severely. "If you think that is proper behaviour in a young lady, and the only repre-

sentative of the principal family amongst us, why *I* do not. The school is a bear-garden when she goes into it You should forbid her the school, Julius."

"The children appear fond of her."

"She spoils them. She thinks of nothing but her own amusement, not in the least of gaining a good influence over them."

"Her amusements seem innocent enough," observed the rector.

That very afternoon, as he was crossing one of those queer fields frequently to be met with in Sussex near the Downs—a field that seemed to have in miniature the characteristics of the whole country, so broken was it into dale and hill, and with a shady copse in one corner—the rector heard the sound of merry laughter, and then of girls' voices singing. A deep indentation, a cup as it were, with steep grass sides, hid the singers from him. Descending the slope on which he stood and ascending the other, smiling, not ill-pleased at the soft sounds, as he drew nearer and could distinguish the words, a frown crossed the brow of the worthy man. Judith was certainly right; this girl *was* running wild—was perhaps even doing harm to the children, for what good could it possibly do them to be taught such words as those that smote upon his astonished ears, and were followed by a shrill peal of laughter?

Slap, bang! here we are again!

The refrain echoed through the "unhandy" field, the ups and downs of which still hid the sinners from view. It really was the senseless comic song just then in vogue, and which the young ladies at Clapham had delighted to chant surreptitiously and *sotto voce* in the garden, or on

the long dull walks they were accustomed to take two-and-two together across the common; that really was the song Miss Olive was teaching the school children. The rector could make out the voice of Lettice, and recognised that of one or two others in the village choir.

When he drew near the little group dispersed. It was only a party of two or three, with whom Olive and Lettice had fallen in unexpectedly.

Olive entertained a very different feeling for the reverend Julius from that she made no secret of entertaining for his sister. She rather liked the dry middle-aged man.

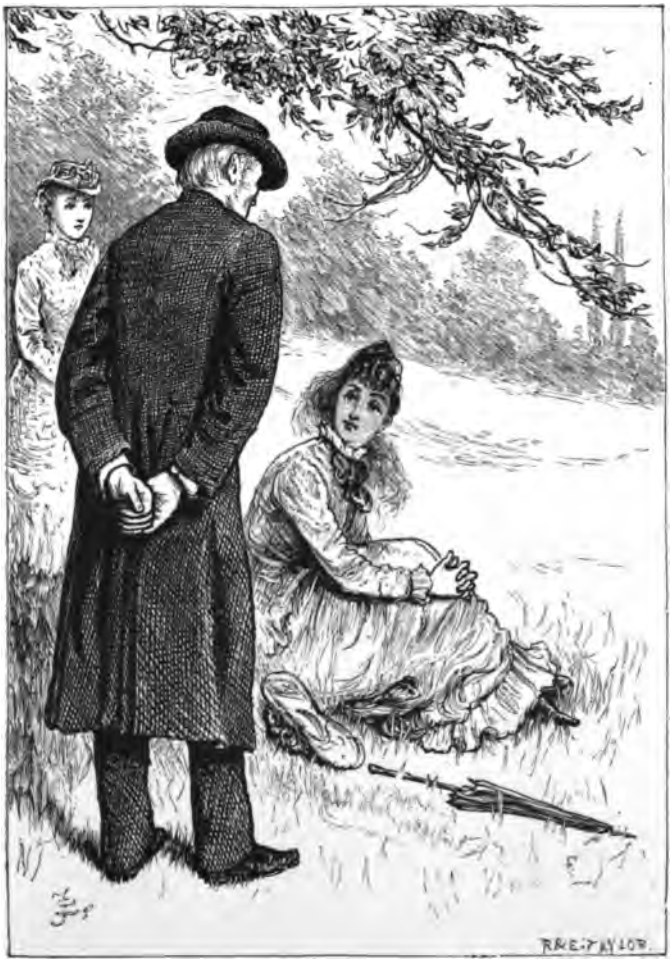
"What a jolly day!" she said now, looking up at him from her seat on the grass, as he stood beside her; while Lettice rose, and, dropping a respectful curtsey, drew a little into the background. Miss Olive had done no harm to Letty's manners, at all events, the rector thought.

"You seem to me to be always out of doors, whether it is a jolly day or not," he said kindly. "Where have you wandered this morning?"

"In the churchyard first, amongst the dead Finns and the dead Snepps; I often go there, you know. Then up to the Downs; but to-day it was too beautiful to stay there, so we turned off into the meadows, and I've just been raising my spirits a little with those living Finns—or do you suppose they are the same over again?"

The rector took no notice of the unorthodox question that would have made his sister's hair stand on end; he only asked why it had been too beautiful to stay upon the Downs.

"I don't know," said Olive, who had a trick of beginning her sentences in that way; "it oppressed me—the



"'What a jolly day!' she said, looking up from her seat on the grass."

wide glorious world, and the little old churchyard it all ends in—for us."

The girl was capable of serious thoughts, then, if she did teach "Slap bang" to the school children. The rector looked at her with more interest than he had yet felt in this new member of his flock.

"If you feel that, don't you think it is a good thing to try and make 'footprints in the sands of time'?" he asked.

"Longfellow," observed Olive, with an emphatic little nod; "they never could puzzle me with quotations at school. As for footprints, I'm here for such a short time. What could I possibly do?"

"Oh, I would do something—*anything*. The children, now; they are very fond of you. You might gain a good influence over them, teach them something better than——"

Olive, though there was a sudden flush on her cheek, could not resist chanting in a low voice the obnoxious line.

"I suppose they should learn nothing but hymns," she said.

"I don't say that. But, come now, young lady, we want a teacher in the Sunday-school; you have a talent for winning hearts. Help us during the short time you are amongst us."

"Too short," interrupted Olive; "abroad for the winter, and then that odious London, and perhaps I shall never see this dear, stupid, sleepy, beautiful place again."

"All the more reason to do something for us while you are here. I shall speak to the superintendent. Let me see; if she takes the second-class boys, you can have her girls."

"Oh, do let me have the boys! They are ever so much jollier than girls. I really do think I could manage boys," cried Olive, with more animation than she had yet shown. "I'll come to the school next Sunday without fail. Lettice, do you hear? I'm to teach the boys."

Devoutly hoping that she would not confine her efforts to teaching them comic songs, the rector walked away across the tossed and broken ground, which in another moment hid him and Olive from one another. He thought, poor innocent man! that he had done a good deed, and that Miss Judith would even be pleased to find her words had taken effect and brought forth fruit.

But Miss Judith cried out in dismay:

"That girl in the Sunday-school! What have you done now?"

She washed her hands of it, and one comfort was that it would be for only a few weeks. Win hearts, indeed! Olive had not succeeded in winning that of Miss Judith, who could not understand the girl, with her sudden changes of mood, her childish pleasures, and her unconventional ways, which were not at all those Miss Judith would have expected, indeed felt she had every right to expect, from a young lady brought up at a fashionable boarding-school. She had been willing to patronise Olive at first, but Olive would not be patronised.

"You must be lonely," the rector's sister had observed; "there *are* a few nice girls in the neighbourhood, fit companions for you, though they live far apart. We will ask them to meet at the rectory. That will be pleasant, will it not?"

"I don't like girls, thank you," said Olive, whose dislike to Miss Judith had the effect of making more marked the shy school-girlish demeanour that her pride took

refuge in. Olive replied that she did not like girls, exactly as she might have declined some offered dainty that was not to her taste. Everything in Miss Judith's little speech displeased the young lady.

"If you had ever been at school, you'd know the comfort of being alone," she said; thinking in her own mind that if she chose to be satisfied with the companionship of Lettice and of the many friends Olive had made for herself in the village, Miss Judith had no right to interfere or to imply that she would provide fitting companions in the "nice girls" she recommended.

But Olive liked the rector, and at his bidding was glad to go to the Sunday-school, where she fully realised the expectations Miss Judith had formed of her.

For instance, on this warm Sunday, when she had come late to church in the afternoon, she had been duly in her place at nine o'clock in the morning. The school was full that day—fuller than perhaps would have been the case had not the breaking-up of the day-school been near at hand, and admission to the breaking-up feast dependent upon tickets for attendance on Sundays. The rector was not present himself, so that Miss Judith kept a more than usually sharp look-out even upon the big boys. These were being questioned by a shy little baker, who answered all his own questions himself. Either the warm weather, or the crowded state of the room, through the open door of which those lucky children in the lower classes could catch a pleasant glimpse of the road and the tall trees bordering it, and the opposite church looking whiter than ever in the sunshine—either the warmth, or the oppression of numbers, made Miss Judith sterner than ever, more quick to detect the furtive peppermint drop, more severe in the rebuke that followed detection. Still the order

and discipline was perfect enough even to satisfy her, except—yes, there was an unusual stir amongst the second-class boys.

The superintendent, who was also mistress of the day-school, knew every child intimately, and loved all alike, turned an anxious glance now and then in that direction, and then looked towards Miss Judith, as though hoping she was either unaware of what was going on, or would be wise enough to let it pass unnoticed.

The second-class boys were crowded round their young teacher, and all of them hanging upon the words that fell from her lips. These words could, however, hardly have been orthodox, Miss Judith considered, for the lads were smiling, and asking questions with an eager curiosity Miss Judith's own scholars were not wont to show with regard to Sabbath lessons; and at last there was the sound of an unmistakable laugh. Miss Judith rose in her place and beckoned the superintendent to her.

"Again, that unseemly noise in the second class. The same teacher, I suppose?"

"Yes, it is Miss Olive." The superintendent could not help smiling. "The boys are very fond of her; she can do anything with them."

"Discipline should be maintained. The children do not come here to laugh," said Miss Judith, the more sternly that she was conscious of a titter passing over her own model class of model elder girls.

"She wins their hearts, and keeps their attention at all times; they do not always laugh," the superintendent said gently.

Her words were true. Whatever Olive had been explaining that seemed to provoke merriment, not only in her hearers but in herself, had come to an end. She

was speaking earnestly and reverently now; an eager light in her beautiful eyes, a flush upon her brown cheek, as she laid a hand now upon the shoulder of one little lad near her, and then upon that of another, addressing them by name, and pleading with them in an earnest child-like way—not at all as though she were teaching them, but merely as though talking with them of things that concerned her and them alike.

"I'm not clever enough, boys, to understand these hard words myself," they heard her say; and Miss Judith noticed that "Flint on the Collects," from which Miss Olive was supposed to be giving a lesson, lay face downwards on the floor, and that one little fellow, in his eagerness to get as near as possible to the teacher, had actually set his foot upon the volume; "but I'm quite sure even the stupidest of us is clever enough to know right from wrong. Oh yes, indeed we are—even you, little Abel, and Johnny! We'll *do* right, then, won't we, boys? Think only how it would grieve me and break my heart if one of my boys went wrong! And if we feel like that for one another, perhaps it is true the Lord who died for us is sorry when we, any of us, do not choose the right."

A softened look came over the face of Miss Judith; but for the fallen book, but for that unorthodox "perhaps" (she would have preferred that Olive should glibly and confidently assure the boys of the Lord's mind towards them), Miss Judith would even have felt touched. As it was she sat down again, and refrained from the public calling to order of the second class, both teacher and taught, with the intention of doing which she had risen from her seat. With a patient sigh and a half-smile, the superintendent returned to her own class; she

loved Olive dearly, and was not in the least surprised, though Miss Judith was, when the little teacher, so earnest a moment before, tipped Johnny Finn's cap over his eyes as the ranks were formed for church, and, with the bulrush she had brought into school with her, tickled the face of sober little Moses Snepp, until it broke into the broadest of smiles, under the very eyes of the rector's sister.

"Discipline should be maintained," said Miss Judith, frowning. She had time for no more; the last bell was ringing, and the orderly little procession filed into church, disappearing beneath the low porch. Olive did not follow as she had intended. She went away to her beloved Downs, and in the afternoon put the climax to her offences in the eyes of Miss Judith, by entering the sacred building during the sermon.

The few bright weeks of summer passed away. Was Olive lonely, wandering over the Downs, living alone with the servants in the ivy-mantled house, being her own mistress to her heart's content? Her old nurse only knew that her darling was growing strong and hearty; that she brought a fine appetite home from that open-air life; and that when the summons came to return, a very different Miss Olive would appear before her father to the pale-faced heavy-eyed girl who had left him. No one knew what thoughts the girl had for company up there on the crest of the Downs, where all England seemed to be spread out at her feet, and here and there black dots upon the silver streak bounding the horizon spoke of distant lands and a wider world far away, to and from which the ships passed over the great waters; or of the thoughts haunting the old churchyard, with its moss-covered stones and rank grass. No one

knew how Olive rejoiced in the free, happy, peaceful life, or how many memories she was storing up; so that this short visit to the old-world spot, that seemed to have been cast up upon the shore and forgotten, while the tide of life rushed on everywhere else, reminded her, through all the years that followed, of that other visit, that had remained with her half-dream half-memory from the days of childhood.

Only a careless summer holiday. But Sunday after Sunday she met her boys in the little schoolroom opposite the church, and did her best for them. Such a little thing to do, Olive thought. As for them, to be one of Miss Olive's boys had become the ambition of every lad in the place. Now and then a letter came to her from her father. She opened them half-reluctantly, half-afraid each one might prove to be her recall home. It came at last.

"And they won't let me take you, Lettice!" cried Olive; "my aunt has engaged a fine French maid for me. But I don't believe you care. I believe you will be quite content to stop here with old Lettice Finn in the churchyard till no one will know you apart."

"That Lettice Finn was quite an old lady, miss; she lived to be nigh upon ninety years old. She was my great-grandmother," said Letty.

"She was every one's great-grandmother, I think! Older than Eve herself. Well, have your own way. Live to be nigh upon ninety in your turn, and to go to sleep under the yew when the time comes. You *might* have gone to London with me, though."

"I'm sure I'd have been glad to go, and you know it, miss. There was no talk of my going ever that I heard of. Mrs. Nurse never led me to hope no such thing."

Lettice lifted the corner of her apron to her eyes, but

whether to wipe away a tear or to hide a blush was doubtful, for young Jonathan was coming up the chalky road towards them. He touched his hat to Miss Olive as he passed, but it was Letty the young fellow looked at.

"He died at eighty-four, you know, Lettice," Olive remarked, as the two girls watched him for a moment before proceeding on their own way; "not so old as your great-grandmother, but still not quite a boy. Life stands still here. I shall find you all living and dead Finns side by side when I come back—and find you and Jonathan together, if I don't much mistake; together under the yew-tree, or in some snug cottage: which would you like best, Letty?"

"You will be sure and come back, Miss Olive?" said Lettice, without answering the random talk of her young mistress, which had puzzled her before now.

"Oh yes; some day, perhaps, I shall come back, an old woman myself, and you will get out of your grave to meet me. There is sure to be a young Lettice Finn here, and a young Jonathan to court her, and I shall always feel that they are just you two, and no one else."

"I don't understand when you talk in that way, Miss Olive. I am stupid, I suppose," said Lettice sighing.

"No; it is I who am stupid. Come, Letty—a race down to the village!"

The rector, meeting the two in their headlong course down the steep chalky road—Olive with her hair flying about her shoulders, and flowers in her hat, at her waist, at the neck of her tight-fitting dress, wherever flowers could possibly be stuck—thought the girl was glad to go away; and no wonder. it must have been a dull time for her.

He shook hands with her at the door of the schoolhouse on her last Sunday, and thanked her for her help.

"It was such a little thing to do," she said.

"It was all you had the chance to do here, and we are very much obliged to you."

The following day Olive went away, as she had come to them, in the same old fly, driving slowly through the lanes to the far-off station. She had sent to London for a present of books for her boys, and had given one to each of them with her own hand. In after-years one or two found their way back to her, thumbed and worn, and with the old Sussex names written on the fly-leaf in a girlish unformed hand.

It was years after that summer holiday that the first of these tokens came to her.

"Poor Johnny Finn! young Johnny is dead," the rector wrote; "he was one of your boys, and in his last illness begged me to send his duty to Miss Olive, and said he would like her to have the book she gave him. He was very patient and gentle in his illness, and a good lad always. Not very bright. They do not forget you here; he told me himself he had 'always been stupid-like, but Miss Olive had learnt him even the stupidest could know right from wrong' and he had tried to choose right. I fancied you would like to hear this, and to have the little book. No, they do not forget you—have not forgotten you all this time. Mothers tell me if a boy gets 'masterful' they have but to remonstrate, 'Well now, you didn't ought to be a bad lad, and you one of Miss Olive's boys!' —you remember the queer Sussex way of speaking, and will understand it, I daresay. I see many of these little books you gave them, meet with them here and there in

different cottages, and find them prized always. This of Johnny's lay on his bed while he was dying."

Her boys had not forgotten her. She had left a footprint—faint and small, perhaps, but still a footprint—in the sands of time. And for herself, it was from that summer she had striven to do little things, never yet having had one girlish dream fulfilled of finding great things to do. She dropped a tear or two over poor Johnny's book, and then said, laughing, that it smelt exactly like a Sussex cottage. She was much the same Olive still. But it was true that the faint musty smell had conjured up before her eyes the interior of many a humble home where she had been welcome.

If the people away there in Sussex had never forgotten her, neither had she forgotten them. The fashionable life she had dreaded had not been without its charm, or without its frequent opportunities of doing "little things." Yet, often her thoughts had flown to the old Manor House; and if she shut her eyes she saw again the soft undulations of the Downs, with those strange forms moving across them, as the clouds overhead flung their shadows upon earth. The memory of the free out-of-door life, and of the hamlet with its human interest, lying close to the bare solitary hills that had fed her mind with thoughtful musings of Time and of Eternity—the remembrance of it all refreshed her now and then, as the breath of the wind over the Downs themselves might have done. The sight and touch of Johnny's book recalled old scenes vividly; but not so vividly as a voice that sounded oddly familiar to her ear amongst the buzz of conversation in her father's drawing-room, one evening, more than a twelvemonth after that letter of the rector's had been written.

It was the rector himself. Olive was married then; she was on the eve of starting with her husband for some foreign Court—it does not matter here which Court it was—to which he had been accredited. Her life lay far away from the Sussex village. Would she ever go there again, the rector wondered. He had been amused and interested in watching her. The brown cheek was still the same, and the large eyes; but the promise of beauty was fulfilled. Olive had always walked well and moved gracefully even in her lanky girlhood; now there was a queenly grace in her tall figure. She was dressed in soft folds of amber silk; diamonds sparkled at her throat and in her hair. When she saw her old friend she came up to him eagerly, holding out both her hands.

"You here! it is such a surprise to see you. Oh yes; I remember you quite well. Did you think I should forget? How are they all in the village? Asleep still as usual? I hope there is no change there at all."

The rector had come to London on a sad errand. One of his lads had gone astray, he told her. It was a long story, too long and too sad to tell her then. But Olive insisted upon being told.

"A Finn, of course," she said, "or a Snepp—not one of my boys, I hope."

"Neither Finn nor Snepp; we have one or two other names amongst us. This is James Craddock; I do not know if he was one of your lads."

"Jem, that lived with his mother in the cottage near the forge? Oh yes, he was mine. I remember all their names. My little school register is somewhere in my desk still. Jem was the biggest boy I had, and not the nicest. He used to kick my ankles and tread on my

dress regularly every Sunday. A great big heavy-looking boy with red hair. What has Jem done?"

He was lying in gaol, the rector told her. A wild lad always, he had gone from bad to worse. From one petty robbery after another it had come to this, that Jem had been tried for his life for murder. Finding out where he came from, the chaplain of the gaol had sent word to the wretched lad's old pastor, in the hope that he might have some influence over him and win him to repentance.

Olive had turned very white. She realised intensely, as an imaginative person always does. She had never been able to talk of such things as those about her did, to whom the last criminal trial was only a subject for after-dinner conversation, and who, in their comfortable and elegant drawing-rooms, in their safe sheltered lives, saw nothing incongruous in gossiping over a fellow-creature standing face to face with an awful death.

"The sentence will be commuted into penal servitude for life," said the rector, reading her looks aright. "I do not think I should have told you had it been otherwise. There were extenuating circumstances, a strong feeling that Jem speaks truth in declaring he did not do the deed, although the evidence is conflicting, and goes against him sadly. He was not alone; the man who has led him wrong and been his ruin was there too."

"And he—the other man, I mean?"

"Escaped. They have not found him yet. What I dread for this poor lad of ours is the hardening effect of his punishment, the terrible companionship he will be thrown into. And he is quite hardened now; we cannot win him to a thought of repentance. If I had remembered he was once one of your Sunday scholars, I do believe I should have tried the effect of that saying of the mothers

in the village, 'You didn't ought to be so hard, and you one of Miss Olive's boys,'" said the rector smiling. He was grieved to see how much he had distressed his young hostess.

But in another moment Olive had moved away. As she went amongst her father's guests, speaking to one and to another, bending her head in a certain little gracious way she had, the rector thought she had already forgotten his tale, and thought that this fashionable life was as hardening as crime itself. Oh, how dare we judge one another in our thoughts as we all do, knowing *how often* we misjudge! The rector was a good man, but he wronged Olive then.

Later, when the rooms were thinning, the country clergyman took his departure quietly, and was on the stairs before he noticed that his host's daughter was following him. She laid her hand on his arm.

"You are going there to-morrow—to that dreadful prison!" she asked. "Would it be any use if I went with you? Will you take me?"

"If you will really do anything so kind," the rector began.

"It is such a little thing to do," she said; "I only heard of it to-night, and after to-morrow I shall be far away—a very little thing to do."

"Would you be allowed?"

"Oh yes," Olive flashed a quick look at her husband as he stood behind her on the step above, "he will let me go."

"I will let her go if it is to do any good," said her husband gravely; "but it is a terrible place to take her to."

"It will do good," answered the rector. Perhaps

in his heart he thought it might do good to Olive as well as to this poor lost sheep of his—might win her to serious thought in the midst of her frivolous and worldly life. So little do we know each other!

The following morning saw the two in a cab together. As it rattled noisily over the stones, Olive endeavoured at the top of her voice to enlighten the rector as to her future life, the plans of herself and her husband. She seemed full of nothing else. The good man, bewildered and confused, not able to hear half she said, and full of trouble with regard to the errand on which they were bound, accused Olive of taking things too lightly, and of being wholly without earnestness of purpose. He wished he had not consented to bring her with him. A whimsical remembrance of the young girl flying at full speed down the chalky hill, of the gay careless voice singing, "Slap, bang! here we are again!" came over him. She was not the least more thoughtful or steady than she had been then, he said to himself.

As they drew near the end of their little journey, Olive became grave and silent. When they entered the prison, a shudder passed over her.

"My husband was right," she said in a low frightened voice; "this is a terrible place. I never was in such a place before. And think only of the Sussex Downs—the innocent village life; how far away it seems!"

"I was never in such a place as this myself," answered the rector, "till I came here after this poor fellow. Yet I think it is not bad for us to be here. It is well to realise this world of crime, so far away, as you truly said, from the world we live in, and yet so perilously near to it; well to realise how soon a careless footstep may cross the boundary and enter, from the happiest home, this

"The wretched lad hid his sullen face, refusing to turn towards them."

dark land. The faces I have seen here, the sight of Jem himself, make me thoughtful for my flock; rough lads, any one of whom might wander away upon the road that leads to this. Temptation lies so near us all."

"You are *sure* he will not die?" asked Olive trembling.

"We are all sure of it. But the reprieve has not yet come, and of course the suspense is awful for him; when that is at an end, he may be softened. To go hardened and unrepentant to the life before him will be ruin, and worse than death."

In the cell they entered by-and-by the wretched lad hid his sullen face, refusing even to turn towards them as their footsteps sounded on the floor. The parson again! what did he want now? Jem had had enough and to spare of his talk. And a woman with him too! Why could not they let him alone? that was all he wanted —just to be let alone.

"Jem," began the rector, but his voice was husky; he waited for a moment, and then spoke again.

"Miss Olive has come to see you, Jem."

It was a more trying interview than Olive had expected when she said what a little thing it was to do. She was shaking now from head to foot, and had turned very pale. But the hard heart was softened, the sullen silence broken, and Jem's conscience touched at last. What she said to him, Olive was never able to remember, and the rector never told. He stood apart, and his eyes grew dim so that he could scarcely see the two—the slight upright figure, a girlish figure still, and the bent slouching form clad in the prison dress.

No, he'd never raised his hand to hurt the old gentleman; he wasn't going to say how 'twere done—that were no affair of his, but it was not he did it. Oh yes, he

remembered Miss Olive, and the Sunday-school, with the church opposite, and his mother's cottage. He had done no harm then; harm enough since? well, yes.

"I mind one day you telling of us as the Lord was sorry when we went wrong. I believe it now—now when a lady like you is sorry, and has come away out of your fine life to see after the likes of me. I believe it now, I do; I never believed it before. There's a little book you give me; I'm to be hung on Friday, and I'd like for you to have the book again, if you'll take it. I ain't read it much, I don't pretend I have, but there's my name and yours wrote in it—'James Craddock from Miss Olive.' I've read that there page a deal oftener than any other. We was all proud of being Miss Olive's boys. I'd be pleased to think you had the book—they are going to hang me Friday."

Thus another of the little books found its way back to Olive; for though Jem escaped the scaffold, this gift of his was at his own request sent to her by-and-by. It was not worn and thumbed as Johnny's had been, but looked bright, almost new, still. There hung about it, however, that same smell of a Sussex cottage, which recalled to Olive ever after, not a village home, but the condemned cell in which she had seen poor Jem.

The reprieve came while she and the rector were there. It was a scene Olive never forgot, but one she never spoke of. Whether it was the sudden relief from the fear of death, or whether it was the love and pity of Olive leading the unhappy lad at last to believe in the Heavenly Love and Pity she used to speak of long ago, who can say? but, touched and softened, Jem entered a repentant man upon his term of punishment. The rector had good reports of him; he will earn his ticket-of-leave before

long. As for Olive, she went abroad with her husband the day after she saw Jem. Whether she will ever see him again is doubtful, or ever go again to the quiet hamlet under the Downs. The old Manor House has been let to strangers.

Ever since that visit of the rector's to London, Miss Judith has spoken of Olive's "great work" in the village. She has forgotten her former opinion of "that girl," conveniently forgotten what kind of girl she was; how she used to run races with her own maid, lie for hours on the heathy upland, spoil the children, demoralise the school and turn it into a bear-garden, and generally rub up all Miss Judith's feelings the wrong way. She has forgotten all this, and speaks warmly now of the "great work," and how it was ultimately the saving of James Craddock.

And all the time Miss Judith is wrong, and Olive herself was right. It was a little thing to do, to teach a few boys on the Sundays of a brief summer holiday—only a little thing.

"The fashion of this world passeth away;" but here and there the impress of little things remains, footprints in the sands of Time.

FAIRY GOLD.

THE May sunshine was bright, the May east wind keen, Mrs. Trueby, venturing her nose, and as little else as possible, outside her door, drew it in again with a shiver, and returned to her straw beehive chair; the person of the old woman was lost to view in it; she retired into that safe shelter as a snail retires into its shell, and the upright sides kept off even the cunningest of the many draughts that filled the room as though it were the cave of Æolus.

A fine airy dwelling, this of Mrs. Trueby. Although measuring barely nine feet by seven, and although almost any grown person in the village, excepting Mrs. Trueby herself, who was a small woman, could, by extending one arm to its fullest length, have touched the ceiling easily, no dwelling of the richest in the land could by any possibility be better ventilated; so that if fresh air were everything, Mrs. Trueby was a rich woman indeed. The place had little claim to the title of house, having very much the appearance of a cupboard that had

been turned out of doors and settled down by the road-side to start in life upon its own account. A hole cut in the wooden wall, and glazed with a single pane, did duty for a window. The door, precisely such a door as you would expect to open upon a row of shelves, or of pegs on which to hang your clothes, did, in fact, open full upon Mrs. Trueby's parlour, kitchen, and bedroom all in one; so that the first object that met the sight of any one who entered was the bed, with its faded patch-work hangings, and which at that first glimpse of it appeared to occupy all the available space. There was room, however, for the beehive chair with Mrs. Trueby in it, for a tiny stove, the chimney of which stuck out oddly on one side the window, and for a small round table. Three shelves, with a curtain of the same patch-work hangings that adorned the bed drawn before them, represented both the wardrobe and larder of the dame; such garments as were not in use being laid upon the lowest of the three, while the others held a strange assort-ment of little yellow basins, a brown earthenware teapot, a cup and saucer, and a jug or two.

The May sunshine, coming in at the square of glass, lit up the room without adding much to its warmth, since the wind, coming in *everywhere*, under the door, over the window, between the boards, filled it also, stirring the bed-hangings, wafting the curtain to and fro, and failing only to penetrate the sides of the straw chair. Over the top of this, for greater protection from the draught, an old shawl had been fastened, so that there was literally nothing of Mrs. Trueby visible, except when she thrust out her head from time to time to look towards the door, muttering each time she did so that "Jarge were long in coming."

Presently a step was heard upon the road outside, and in a moment after a hand touched the latch; it took such a slight touch at any time to throw open the door, that it flew wide at once. Mrs. Trueby had sunk back into the cavernous depths of the chair; there was nothing to be seen of her at all. She made herself heard however.

"You've took your time! I might have been blown clean away, and much you'd care, which the wind gets in worse than ever, and no fire neither. What's kept you?" she said sharply.

There was no answer. Thrusting out her head, Mrs. Trueby became aware that it was a stranger who stood in the entrance to the cupboard-like apartment, and that he was staring with a somewhat puzzled expression at the chintz hangings of the bed—they being all he could see until he stepped further into the room. The stranger was a tall spare young man, dressed in black; he held a book in his hand, and there was a look about his eyes and the corners of his mouth that betokened a touch of humour in his composition, though his face was grave enough at that moment. An oddly sudden change came over the occupant of the beehive chair.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," she began; "which it is the new clergyman, if I don't mistake. It's the Lord sent you here this day in answer to my prayer."

"What did you want me for?" asked the curate, coming quite into the room and closing the door carefully.

"To speak a word in season to my soul," was the prompt answer, as Mrs. Trueby folded her hands upon her lap, and turned up the eyes that had a moment before peered out so sharply from beneath the old shawl over her head; "there isn't nothing only that as I prayed the Lord for this very morning."

"You took me for some one else just now," remarked the curate, looking round for something to sit upon. Seeing nothing but the block on which Mrs. Trueby was in the habit of chopping her firewood, or probably of having it chopped for her, he sat down on that—a position that brought his knees in close proximity to his chin, but had the advantage of bringing his face on a level with that of the old woman, whose sharp bead-like eyes watched him intently from out the depths of her sheltering chair.

"Whom did you take me for?" asked the curate.

"For my grandson Jarge, as ought to have been here before now. I'm an old woman and must look to be neglected, but the Lord don't forget me, if Jarge do. Only this morning I was asking for one to come by as would read to me from the Book. I ain't no scholar myself, but I hunger and thirst after the Word, I do."

"Do you want me to read to you?"

The direct question seemed rather to surprise Mrs. Trueby, who probably thought she had given sufficient intimation of her pious wishes. The old rector, or any of the ladies, would have understood her at once, but then they would have brought some little gift calculated to appease a temporal as well as spiritual hunger and thirst. This young man appeared to have nothing with him but the book, which he proceeded to open.

"Is there anything particular you wish to hear?" he said.

Mrs. Trueby turned up her eyes.

"It's all good," she sighed.

"Then I'll read you a psalm."

The wind whistled through the curate's red hair as he sat on the wood block with his knees close to his chin, and the book held close to his short-sighted eyes, but the

grandly beautiful words fell slowly and reverently from his lips, and should surely have lifted the heart of his auditor, there, where his own heart seemed to be as he read—before the Great White Throne, and near to God. Mrs. Trueby groaned.

"What's the matter? are you ill?" asked the curate, closing his book, but keeping one finger in to mark the place.

The old woman sat more upright in her chair; an angry flush glowed upon her faded cheek.

"My spirit be moved within me through hearing of the Word," she said, in acid tones.

The curate's eyes rested on her with a look of unfeigned pity; he opened his mouth to speak, then on second thoughts opened his book once more instead, and read on.

The divinely inspired words of praise, the human cry of one fainting, failing even, in a sore struggle, and yet ever renewing hope through a living faith, appeared to stir the heart of the reader as though they came home to his daily life and had their echo in his own experience. The words he read seemed a familiar lauguage in which he was but expressing his own hopes and fears and temptations, instead of something so mysteriously apart from all of these, that it required to be approached in a particular frame of mind before one could read or hear with edification, as Mrs. Trueby had always considered was the case. She leaned back in her chair and looked at the curate, or at as much of him as she could see over the top of his book, until he closed it at last and looked at her.

"Who have's your tea-leaves?" Mrs. Trueby said then.

"The grandly beautiful words fell slowly and reverently from his lips"

"Never you mind," answered the curate, rising, and speaking with a cheerful ring in his voice, though to some people this sole remark after his ministrations might have been depressing. The curate said afterwards that he would much rather Mrs. Trueby should ask point-blank for his tea-leaves, than tell him she had prayed the Lord to send them to her.

"She always does say that," explained one of his district visitors; "if you bring her needlework you find she has that very morning prayed for employment for her fingers; if it is soup, then she has just asked for food for the body; or if you come to read to her, for food for the soul. People think her a very pious person."

"Her experiences are considered interesting," observed the district visitor's young sister demurely. "Once, before showing what I had with me, I asked what it was she had prayed for that day, and she assured me she had prayed the Lord to send her food, or work, or nothing at all, exactly as was best for her."

"An unjustifiable experiment; for after all I suspect it is a fair bargain between you," said the curate quietly.

"How a bargain?"

"Mrs. Trueby talks piety in hopes of soup and shillings, and you go to see her, not so much for her sake as for the sake of scoring one visit to the poor in your account with heaven. 'Other-worldliness!'" the curate continued, watching in an absent manner a little flock of school children who were straggling along the lane towards him; "did you never fancy Mr. Worldlywise is seldom so odious as when he is *other-worldlywise*, and tries to make a bargain with heaven, thinking to enter it by-and-by clinging to poor folks' skirts?"

Turning his head, as though to ask for the answer to

his question, he became aware that he had reduced one at least of his auditors to a state of hopeless bewilderment, though in the eyes of the younger girl there was visible the dawning of a new idea.

"I beg your pardon," said the curate hastily; "I only mean that it seems a pity not to do what we can for the poor for their own sakes, instead of merely because charity is a duty we owe to ourselves;" and having translated himself into plain English he walked away.

"What an extraordinary young man!" exclaimed the district visitor, with a catch in her breath. "I doubt whether he can be sound."

Her sister said nothing.

George Trueby—Jarge as the old woman pronounced his name—was Mrs. Trueby's grandson. He worked as day-labourer on a farm at the outskirts of the village, and lodged near his work; but during the dinner-hour it was his daily habit to see after his grandmother's comfort, and to take her some little mess, for which his own meal was the poorer, and which he not unfrequently found a difficulty in disposing of in the old woman's larder. Every one carried dainties to Mrs. Trueby. A widow, getting up in years, past work, and dependent upon the minimum of parish pay considered sufficient for the support of one person—how could charity be better bestowed? The array of yellow basins which had their place upon the upper shelf, behind the patch-work hanging, was accounted for by the contributions flowing in from the tables of the gentlefolks, but, as Mrs. Trueby was fond of remarking to her grandson, these were not supplies to be reckoned upon, though to be sure they had never failed yet, whereas the daily portion he brought entered into her calculations, and might be looked to as

a certainty. To whom should she look if not to her own flesh and blood? The allowance from the parish would have been higher, but that George paid the shilling a week exacted as rent for the cupboard; it was he who kept the stove supplied with coal, and thanks to him that Mrs. Trueby's wood-stack was as big as that of any of her neighbours.

Thus it came to pass that the old woman was comfortable enough, and indeed better off than many whose lot at first sight appeared more prosperous; and, being comfortable, Mrs. Trueby troubled herself very little about other people; not at all about George and pretty Janey Grey, living with her mother in the lodge at Rushton Park. They were young enough to wait. It was plain they must wait, since Mrs. Grey would not hear of their marriage until George's savings amounted to a sum satisfactory in the eyes of the ex-lady's-maid, who considered her child might have looked higher since her father had been gamekeeper to Sir James. How much higher Mrs. Grey never said; but the smart valets staying now and then at the Park, to say nothing of the permanent under-butler, were a real trial to George, who could not fail to notice how civil Mrs. Grey was to them, and how welcome she made them at the lodge, where she received George himself with so much coldness.

"He has his grandmother to provide for," she said once; "with that burden on his shoulders he is not in a position to set up for himself."

"If we were once married, grandmother would live with us, of course," George would reply; but grandmother herself was far too wise to entertain any such idea. Was it to be expected that the gentry would continue to supply her needs, as they did at present, if she

were living in her grandson's house? Whereas the draughty little cabin she now inhabited was in itself an appeal to their kind feelings, and the draughts mattered nothing to her in the sheltering chair George had provided, or the warm bed which charitable ladies were so careful to keep covered with the best and thickest of Witney blankets. Then, although the parish allowance would continue in George's home, she would undoubtedly be obliged to spend it there, while now—well, what became of it now, or of the frequent presents bestowed upon her, and the money paid for hemming dusters and sheets, the only work she undertook, Janey Grey could not help wondering as she watched her lover go by day after day with that little tin pail in his hand, and knew all he did for his grandmother.

Thus the selfish old age dragged out its length of years in the windy cabin, and the young lives saw golden hours passing ungarnered; while Janey sighed over her needlework, and George began to feel heavy-hearted as he remembered how time was slipping away and how slowly his shillings and sixpences mounted up.

Meantime, people were so fatally ready to visit the pious Mrs. Trueby with a shilling in one hand and the Bible in the other, that perhaps it was not much to be wondered at that she had learned to look with more anxiety for the coin than for any other good to be found between the pages of the book, and only natural that she should be disappointed in the new curate.

"He 'ain't give me nothing," she said to George, when he appeared on that sunshiny windy May morning. "I don't think much of him; I don't think nothing at all of him. He 'ain't done nothing but read out, and he didn't do that like others neither."

"How then?" asked George, who was coaxing the fire to burn, and thinking how short a time he would have left to spend with Janey, on his way back to work, if that stove meant to be as troublesome as was often the case in a high wind. "He reads up beautiful in church: it makes a man listen."

"He reads like as if he meant it all," said Mrs. Trueby, in an aggrieved tone; "not like as if it were Scripture. He never spoke no word in season, and he never give me nothing."

She grumbled all the time George was bringing the obstinate stove to reason, and went on grumbling after he had succeeded so that a tiny fire burnt cheerily in the grate; but as he sat where the curate had sat—upon the wood-block, George was either too much interested in watching the flame, or too much occupied with his own thoughts, to listen to his grandmother with the undivided attention she generally exacted from him, for his words, when he spoke at last, were wide of the mark.

"The parish pay you've had all these years, now; that would mount up to a good bit if one was to see it all at once," he observed.

But that his eyes were still riveted upon the fire, he might have felt some surprise at the startled look the old woman threw around the room, and at the sudden anger with which she turned towards him.

"What be thinking of? What's the parish pay to thee? It is little enough they give to keep a poor creature out of the House, which it would be a shame to you if I was to be drove into it; little enough, and giv'd grudging into the bargain."

"Oh, I know 'tain't much! I was but thinking that

little and little mounts up in time—though the time do seem long before it have mounted up—enough for to furnish a room or two say. Provided one could lay it by, even parish pay would run up."

"And there ain't nothing smaller than that," said Mrs. Trueby quickly.

"Nothing smaller," assented George, in a meditative tone, as he leant forward to place a bit of coal between the bars, "and that's what makes it so encouraging. Little as it is, if you look upon it week by week, why in all these years it would have growed to be—why, a matter of hard upon forty or fifty pounds; enough to start a business with, enough to start a man and his wife first-rate."

"A matter of forty or fifty fiddlesticks!" exclaimed the old woman angrily, again giving that uneasy glance round the room; "and it 'ain't been ten years neither that I've had relief, and it weren't two shillings all the time neither. You might know they give as little as they can; there ain't nothing smaller than what they *do* give."

"Nor so small, one might say; leastways, unless it is the trifle as I contrive to lay by weekly. And that's the encouragement of it: if one would mount up why t'other will, in time."

"You do be thinking it would mount up quicker but for the little you does for me, as is your own flesh and blood, and left with no one else to look to, and done for you from your youth upwards. I 'ain't no patience with such unfeeling thoughts!"

She resumed her interrupted meal and her grumble together, while George, too well used to her ways to attempt to defend himself, got up from the wood-block, and after giving a look round to see what else was

needed, went out and up the lane, sweet with blossoming hawthorn, to the lodge-gate, where Janey was shyly waiting for him.

The curate, having once found his way to Mrs. Trueby, took her at her word, and repeated his visits from time to time. As he never gave her anything, and never brought anything with him but the book from which he read, she gradually ceased to expect from him the trifling alms so lavishly bestowed by most of her other friends, and possibly, for that very reason, gradually took more and more interest in that which the curate did bring. Indeed, Mrs. Trueby left off groaning and turning up her eyes, left off thinking solely of herself and the edifying effect she had been led to think her demeanour produced on others, and began to listen intently as she leant back in the old arm-chair, while the curate, seated on the wood-block—since there really was nothing else to sit upon—read to her of the mansions not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens; of those who, having meat and raiment, should therewith be content; or of the treasure all might lay up on high, where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt, nor thieves break through and steal.

Still it remained more or less a grievance with Mrs. Trueby that the reader did not pause to expound the Scriptures to her, but only, as the words went straight home to her heart, looked at her searchingly over the top of the worn leather book he read from. She still told George that she did not think much of the new parson, but at the same time she looked out with more and more eagerness for his visits.

The old rector was away at a fashionable watering-place, whither he had been ordered for his health.

Every now and then he paid a short visit to the rectory to see how the man who was doing all the work for a quarter of the pay might be getting on; and upon one of these occasions Mrs. Trueby complained of the curate to his master, who had found time to look in upon her—not without the accustomed shilling leaving his waistcoat pocket for her withered hand.

But on the whole, after the Sunday services, when the church had been well filled, and the people had listened to the sermon with a sort of intenseness that the rector had not noticed in his congregation hitherto, he went back to his health-resort, comfortably satisfied with regard to his parish and the man in charge of it. If eccentric, why he was young and willing to be guided, and had evidently won the hearts of the people.

On his next visit to Mrs. Trueby, whether actuated by the remembrance of the wishes of his rector or by some other motive, the curate did talk to the old woman; that is to say, he told her a fairy tale. Whether it was edifying or not, his hearer listened spell-bound, and with somewhat of the same uneasy glances round the room that she had indulged in while George was speaking of parish pay. The tale the curate repeated was one of fairy gold that turned to stones and leaves and rubbish in some hands, while in others dead leaves became silver coins. And then he read to her as usual, and the passages he chose were the parable of the ten talents, and certain sayings of how it is more blessed to give than to receive, and "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" and again, the story of him whose barns were full, and whose soul was required of him that night; and other words that told of good measure given to men; of those who were to give,

looking for nothing in return; and, finally, of the gifts of God to all of us.

Every now and then the curate looked at Mrs. Trueby over the top of his book, as it had become a habit with him to do; but he added no words of his own to those strong true words he read. By-and-by, as he opened the door and stood for a moment upon the threshold, so that a whole flood of sunlight streamed into the room and lit up every corner of it, he observed that it was a sad pity nothing turned up for George and Janey; and that wages were surely low in these parts, or Mrs. Grey more prudent than other people. "Janey was a good girl," he said, and then the curate went away without another word.

Mrs. Trueby used to say later that he had expounded the Scripture to her for the first time that day.

It was warm weather now. The hop-picking would begin before long, and already bands of "foreigners" might be seen tramping along the roads from Rye and Winchelsea, and even from Hastings, in order to find work in the hop-gardens. The water-lilies bloomed on the moat of Bodiam Castle; the coal barges on the canal floated lazily down, or were moored at the landing-stage, where apparently there was no one to attend to them, so silent and peaceful was the whole place under the warm September sun. But the peace was rudely enough broken by these gangs of hop-pickers—a rough lot, who came noisily shouting to one another, or singing as they went along the straight road from the chalk downs, frightening the mistress of the lonely wayside inn below Bodiam, and obliging both her and her husband to keep a sharp outlook upon the whole premises and the small farm adjoining, until such times as the invasion ceased, or rather till work held the invaders, when there would be quietness

again for awhile, though they were apt to be more troublesome still on the return journey when hop-picking was over.

On they went, leaving the low swelling chalk hills farther and farther behind them, and having the rich weald country in front. Up the steep winding lanes, with acres on acres of hop ground on either side, and so away through all that part of Sussex towards Tonbridge, but seldom diverging into the more secluded districts, where the very names of the villages are reminders of the old iron furnaces, cold and dead now, but once making the weald prosperous, as at leafy Lamberhurst, where the railings round St. Paul's were cast; for there, in those quieter hamlets, the home population is sufficient for the hop-picking, and the foreigners would be but unwelcome guests.

Not that they are welcome, excepting to the farmers, anywhere. As a band of them went through the village, Mrs. Trueby looked out scowling from her narrow pane of glass. Nor was she singular in the dislike with which she regarded them. There were ugly tales about of chickens being snapped up at farm-yard gates, and of back doors entered unceremoniously. Indeed, just now people were careful to keep their doors locked. Old Master Fletcher had all his week's wash stolen from the garden hedge, where it had been incautiously left by his daughter, whose business it was to "do for him." There was no doubt as to the thieves, but no possibility of reclaiming the plunder.

It was after this theft from Master Fletcher that George found his grandmother more uneasy than usual. She made him look very carefully to the bars and bolts of the frail door. He was rather inclined to laugh at her.

"'Twouldn't take but a good knock from a strong fist to bring the whole place down, let alone the door," he said; "and there's nothing worth stealing here either, and you never away from it to speak of. Are you afraid the foreigners will be after your arm-chair, grandmother, or after them little basins? To be sure, they'd often find a meal there if they only knew it."

His grandmother was very angry with him. Vehement in her assertions that of course there *was* nothing worth stealing, she declared he might know a lone woman was easily scared; but he never had any feeling for her, she said—he that lived cheerful at the other end of the village, while she was alone in her old age, with no cottage within sight except Master Jones's little tiled house that she could see as she sat.

George laughed again. Though it was true that the tiny wooden cabin appeared lonely enough if you came upon it first from the road beyond the village, it was only a bend in the said road that concealed the rest of the hamlet; and as for the one house visible, and only a stone's-throw off, why it was that of the constable himself; and what better neighbour could any one afraid of thieves be blessed with?

"The foreigners have never done you harm yet," he added, "and it's a number of years you've seen them come and go."

Mrs. Trueby shook her head. It was not only the foreigners. Many a wild lad that had gone off to the coast, and had not done well there, would from time to time turn up again in the village, with their still wilder companions; and the old woman had seen more than one such about this season. Jeff Blake, who knew the ins and outs of every house in the place, had come to her

door that very morning, and she had found it hard to get rid of him.

"What! is Jeff back? I thought he was off to sea," George exclaimed. "I made sure the place would see him no more for years to come."

"So did I; so did I," Mrs. Trueby repeated; "and here he be after only a few months. He's a bad lot, Jeff is; he give his mother a sore heart before she died; and now here he be, where none wants him; loafing along to the hop-picking with the roughest lot that ever you see, and walking straight in at my door, as though he made sure of a welcome."

George could not understand that; neither could he understand why his grandmother should care so very much about Jeff's unexpected return, or be so angry at it. To be sure the whole village had thought itself well rid of the reckless lad when he had taken his departure in the preceding winter, and perhaps no one would be glad to see him now. Still it puzzled George why his grandmother should think so much of the ne'er-do-weel, or why he should have thought of entering her abode.

"You didn't never have no dealings with none of them Blakes, did you?" he asked, in a whole flood of puzzled negatives, which always do get piled one upon another in the speech of these friends of mine whenever they are or wish to be more than usually emphatic in their utterances.

The old lady demanded testily enough to be informed whether it were at all likely she would have dealings with such people.

"He come prying and peeping here just before he started off; and he come prying and peeping again this morning," she said.

"Whatever was there to peep at?" asked George.

"What should there be?" asked his grandmother in reply. The lad was a bad lad, and liked to "terrify" an old woman; and was George himself out of his wits to be surprised at anything Jeff Blake did, and to make so much out of a nothing? The lad was not worth talking of; but Mrs. Trueby would have a good strong bolt on her door, and keep it drawn all through hop-picking: George must see about it at once. This he obediently did, although iron bolts are not to be had for nothing, for he never had grudged his grandmother anything he could do for her. Just as he was fixing on the door a bolt—strong enough to pull it down, he told her laughingly—the tall figure of the curate was seen coming along the road. The sight seemed to suggest a new train of ideas to Mrs. Trueby, for she left off grumbling about Jeff Blake or scolding George for his want of feeling, and watched him silently as he fixed the last screws, and then she suddenly asked him how long Mrs. Grey intended to hold out against his marriage, and what amount of means she would consider sufficient for him and Janey to begin life upon.

Any show of interest in any concerns except her own was so rare that George was taken by surprise; yet he answered the question promptly enough; for, poor fellow! he had his lesson by heart and said it over daily.

"The rent of a cottage for a year to come; enough for to furnish part of it, Janey's own savings doing the rest; and a bit of money, say ten pounds, laid by into the bargain."

"My patience! don't she wish she may get it?" cried Mrs. Trueby, banging the door to, and drawing the new bolt ostentatiously just as the curate passed. He stood

in the road for a moment to ask George if anything was wrong, and then the two men walked away together, Mrs. Trueby watching from her window until the bend in the road hid them from sight, when she settled herself in the beehive chair placed full in the sun's rays that penetrated into the cabin, and dozed away the hot afternoon hours.

The little room grew stifling, for Mrs. Trueby refrained from opening the window, through which Jeff Blake had thrust his head that very morning, making her jump and frightening her out of her wits. Now and then dropping off to sleep, and waking with an uncomfortable start, the old woman would look round as though she half expected to see the intruder in some corner—perhaps that corner near the bed-head where the faded patchwork valance touched the boards, the corner to which her uneasy glance was so frequently directed, and which she was careful to sit facing always. Or she would from time to time, while only half-awake, mutter of "fairy gold," or of "thieves breaking through to steal."

Out of doors, the hot bright sunshine was over everything. Mrs. Trueby was not singular in locking her door; every other door in the village was locked also. But then the other houses were empty—men, women, and children having all turned out into the hop-gardens. To find his flock the curate must go there himself. Indeed, that was a habit of his in most seasons. The men were rarely at home except in cases of sickness, and it was the men he wanted. They had grown used to see the tall black figure coming across the ploughed land, or through the harvest fields. Hedgers and ditchers at their solitary roadside work, miles away from the village, to which they would tramp back at night, and which they left almost at dawn, as the briers, rotten wood, and

ungainly straggling branches fell before their shears, to lie on the moist damp earth, and give out the indescribable scent of a newly-clipped hedge, learnt to look now and then along the stretch of road for the familiar figure, and to be glad when they saw it; for the interchange of a few friendly words then in the midst of their work gave a strong sense of some one caring for them, since the curate thought it worth while to walk so far to seek them out. Neither was it anything strange to the woodmen felling the timber in the copse to see this friend of theirs coming through the trees or over the cleared land. The women he could find at home; the men he must seek afield, and glad they were to have him seek them.

Perhaps it was not wonderful, though the old rector wondered what spell was used, that, when the curate was so ready and eager to learn all the men could tell him of their work, they in their turn should listen willingly when he spoke to them of his. The mysteries of sheep-shearing and washing, the best time and the likeliest days for sowing, the effect of the weather on different crops, even the ways of the wood animals, and the favourite haunts of the wild flowers, the curate was as curious over it all as a boy, as full of questions, and as ready to be taught. And now the hop-gathering interested him greatly; and if the gatherers interested him still more, in mixing with them as he did he found the surest way to gather his own harvest, and the best way to be about his Master's business.

George tried in vain to tempt his grandmother into the health-giving air—said to prolong life—of the hop-gardens. Even Janey Grey, who paid her a visit now and then, shyly endeavouring to ingratiate herself with

the grandmother of her betrothed, failed to induce her to leave her stifling room, the door of which seldom opened now excepting to the well-known rap of the curate, when he and his worn leather book stood before it. Mrs. Trueby had been in the habit now and then of venturing as far as the shop where the little she did spend found its way; but this hop-picking she manifested a rooted dislike to leaving her tiny dwelling even for a few minutes. With the foreigners about, and Jeff Blake lurking near, it was not safe, she declared. Her abuse of this wild lad did not cease, so that George was all the more surprised on passing late one evening, when the day's work was done, and it had grown almost too dark to distinguish the hops from the vine, to see Jeff himself standing at the door of the cabin, and Mrs. Trueby apparently talking to him. They separated almost at the moment George caught sight of them, and Jeff came towards him, tossing a bright half-crown in his hand, and laughing heartily.

"A liberal old lady, your granny!" he called out as he passed.

"Did she give you that?" cried George, amazed; for dusk though it was, Jeff had taken care to show the coin.

"Not the first neither! What a silly you are, George Trueby! And you and the prettiest lass in the village walking together still."

"What do you mean?" George turned to follow the lad, but, with a whoop, he had leaped the low hedge of the field they were passing, and had disappeared.

The village, deserted and silent all day long, like a village of the dead, was alive again at this hour. The cottage doors were all open, the women and children having been home some time; smoke ascended from

every chimney; there was a savoury smell here and there mingling with the universal fragrance of hops; and the tired men were dropping in one by one to the evening meal. Late as it was, George paused at his grandmother's door as he passed it again. It was shut; there was no light within; everything looked as quiet as usual; and, forbearing to disturb the old woman, her grandson put off the explanation of Jeff's mysterious conduct till next day.

"Be you demented, Jarge?" exclaimed Mrs. Trueby, when he spoke of it later. "Where should I get half-a-crown? and when I'd got it, what should make me fling it away again? Be you demented, to credit aught one like that 'ere lad says to terrify and take a rise out of a body, which he do be doing at every chance he gets?"

George really did consider it would have been only like Jeff to try and make a fool of him, and felt rather vexed at having been taken in. He took no notice therefore of the lad, only shaking his head at him half laughingly when they next met. Now the fact was, as the discerning reader will long ago have perceived, that Mrs. Trueby had for years been in the habit of hoarding such coins as came into her possession, whether in the shape of the weekly parish dole, or the alms of her many friends. Since she seldom purchased anything for herself, unless it might be an occasional pound of candles, a little soap, and such like articles, which people were not thoughtful enough to supply her with, or now and then a little tea and sugar, her savings, in the course of the ten years since her widowhood, had reached no inconsiderable sum. The habit of saving grew upon her by degrees. In the days when the odd shillings and sixpences first mounted up to a pound, and then nearly to

another, Mrs. Trueby had seriously pondered whether it would not be well to open an account with the Post Office Savings Bank just then started in the place. It is probable she would have done so, but that it appeared to her, and perhaps would have been, impossible to conceal the fact from the parish authorities, who of course in that case would have granted no further relief; and to be bereft of the means of adding regularly to her hoard was a contingency Mrs. Trueby had not courage to face. Something might happen any day to George, she said to herself, and then whom would she have to look to? And what a provision for her declining years her savings might come to represent. She went on hoarding therefore; and as she did so became gradually possessed by that strange unholy spell and wile of the Evil One—the love of money for its own sake. Every half-crown paid for such work as she undertook, every shilling given to her, and all that could possibly be saved from the parish allowance without exciting suspicion—for Mrs. Trueby was wise enough to know that *something* she must spend from time to time over and above the few pence that found their way to the baker—all this was laid aside; until, since the money was in silver, the coins in the canvas bag hidden beneath the loose board in the flooring, near the bed's head, grew somewhat unmanageable in bulk, and their possessor was seriously troubled where to bestow them in safety.

Part with her store to other keeping than her own she could not. Alone in the small room, the blind drawn across the window, a twist of rag stuffed into the keyhole of the door, this woman bent her stiff and aged knees with painful effort, till, kneeling on the floor, and raising the end of the board, she could count and recount the

"He greeted his detection with a loud laugh."

precious coins. Dead leaves, indeed, and rubbish in her keeping, was the fairy gold that might have been transmuted into happiness for George and Janey.

It was on one of these occasions, when worshipping her idol—gray hairs, that should have been venerable, all dishevelled, bleared eyes gloating over the treasure that the withered and bony hand fingered lovingly—that a sudden sharp sound, as of a pebble flung against the window-pane, attracted Mrs. Trueby's attention.

She looked round. Not a venerable or respectable figure this, crouched on hands and knees, and turning its head with nervous haste, so that the scanty hair falling over the eyes impeded momentarily the sight. When Mrs. Trueby, having pushed aside the hair could see distinctly, all looked as usual. But, as has often been repeated, the cabin was draughty—all the winds of heaven seemed to fill it—and watching for an instant or two, Mrs. Trueby saw that the blind drawn across the window moved slightly from time to time, and each time it did so disclosed the face of Jeff Blake looking in.

He greeted his detection with a loud laugh, and coming to the door, beat upon it loudly, demanding to be let in to share the spoil. The old woman only succeeded in getting rid of him by means of a bribe, which, sorely though it pained her, it seemed the wisest course to follow.

He left the place the day after, and left Mrs. Trueby in doubt as to how much or how little he had seen. In the short glimpses of the interior of the room which it would be possible to catch between the flapping of the blind, he could not have seen much, she thought. Indeed, that he was content to go away with a bright shilling was proof enough that he had not seen all there was to see—

the fact being that, at that time, Jeff merely accused the old woman, in his own mind, of wishing to secrete the last charitable gift of the rector, since it was quite as well the parish should not know there was money in the house of any one receiving out-door relief. If Mrs. Trueby did not spend the shilling herself, it was better that Jeff should have it than that it should lie in the crack of a board, he thought; and it had been a rare lark to startle her and see her look so queer.

The fun was all he thought of when he passed the cabin on his return with the hop-pickers, and the sight of it recalled the affair to his memory, so that he stuck his head in at the open window, hoping to make Mrs. Trueby jump again. It was the quite disproportioned alarm she betrayed, and her dismay at his reappearance, that had suggested to him she really had money in the place, and emboldened him to go in and terrify her still more; yet he was surprised at receiving another shilling on condition of holding his tongue as to where it came from. Of course he came again, but more for the fun of the thing than with any fixed evil intention. This was to dawn later.

That the curate had a shrewd suspicion of the state of the case may perhaps have been owing to the personal sympathy with each one of his flock. Far from visiting Mrs. Trueby with the sole view of getting through his allotted work, or even, as he had mystified the district visitor by saying, with a view to scoring one visit to the poor in his account with heaven, he really felt a keen interest in this fellow-creature who had travelled thus far upon the road, so that the surest prospect visible ahead must be the grave, and who was yet burdened with the sin of selfishness. Being thus interested, and his attention,

in his intercourse with his flock, being at all times fully awake, he had soon come to understand that since Mrs. Trueby lived almost exclusively upon charity, supplemented by George's scanty wages, the money she received must of necessity be hoarded somewhere.

Mrs. Trueby had not remained wholly unimpressed by the ministrations of this man, who speaking few words of his own, yet appealed powerfully to her conscience, so that between her awakened sense of wrong-doing, and the constant worry of Jeff's visits and rude behaviour, she grew more and more uneasy every day. More than once she was half inclined to confess to her secret hoard, and make her home with George and Janey, but was checked in these good intentions by the remembrance that in that case she could no longer add to her store, and to add to it had become the one object of her life.

She still felt a thrill of pleasure that stirred the blood in the old veins whenever—the door made fast, and the window more carefully shaded than when Jeff first peeped in—she placed yet one more coin in the canvas bag, and felt its weight, and thought how rich she was—how far above want even should anything befall George, how independent really of Mr. Fisher, the relieving officer, to whom she was so civil and humble when he called at her door each Friday on his weekly rounds. Fisher had always been impressed by the pious phrases of Mrs. Trueby, and looked upon her as one of the most deserving cases on his list.

The only difference in her since her first acquaintance with the curate was one that had stolen over her so gradually as to be imperceptible to any but a keen observer—the pious phrases once wont to fall so glibly from her lips became rarer.

Whether it was that the words themselves recalled the intense earnestness with which the curate used them, so that they seemed to mean more on his lips than Mrs. Trueby dared persuade herself they meant on hers, or that, having become aware of how wedded to Mammon was her sordid heart, she had grown afraid to continue the lip service for which she had hitherto been remarkable, who can say?

The glowing autumn days wore on, and the hop-gardens were one by one cleared. Bands of foreigners began once more to pass along the road to the coast, and those that had been employed in the neighbourhood of the village started in their turn. Jeff Blake lingered behind his friends. For some days the idea had been slowly gaining ground in his mind, that before going back to the wild life amongst the fishing population of Rye and Hastings, whither he meant to return, it would be well to pay a last visit to the cabin of Mrs. Trueby. The amusement of frightening the old woman had lost its charm. Besides, for the last time or two he had knocked loudly at the door, threatening to let all the village know there was a miser in their midst, the threat that had before now wiled a shilling from her trembling grasp had failed of its effect. She had refused to give him anything, and bid him tell what he chose. Jeff was too cunning for that. Though he only suspected her of possessing a few shillings (possibly a pound or more), the little there was he meant to secure for himself.

Sitting idly on a stile in the hedge, from which he had often watched the door, Jeff, one warm sultry afternoon, saw the curate go up to it, rap, and be instantly admitted. The senses of Jeff being on the alert just then, he not only noticed that the curate touched the door with the

book he carried in his hand, but remembered having noticed the same thing before, and that the result was a dull thud, very unlike his own noisy raps, or the honest knock of George's knuckles. Thinking of this, and remarking how quickly the gentle signal was responded to, Jeff laughed silently before he got down from the stile, and lounged away up the village to a small public-house at the farther end. The house did not bear a very good repute, and no lodger more respectable than Jeff, and the wild companions of his that he had brought with him, was ever to be found there.

That night the heat, that had for some few days past been oppressive, was worse than ever. In the loft over the cow shed, which was all the accommodation Jeff chose to pay for, and where indeed a heap of fragrant hay made a bed that was not to be despised, the air was suffocating. It was impossible to sleep either, while his mind was restlessly occupied with one plan after another for attaining his object. He rose, and slipping quietly down the ladder leading from the loft, went out into the warm silent night, and slouched through the sleeping village, till out upon the high road he came to the cabin. The uneasy barking of the bull-dog chained in the front garden of the house of Jones the constable, the near neighbourhood of that little house itself, the dead silence of the summer night, through which a cry for help, even from the feeble lungs of an old woman of seventy, would surely be heard, the strong clumsy bolt, which would make noise unavoidable by any one attempting to break open the door, the narrow pane of glass, through which not even his lithe sinewy frame could possibly be thrust, all this baffled the midnight thief. He returned as he had gone, and the next day congratulated himself that he had been baffled, for

circumstances inclined him to return to his original plan —the plan that first occurred to him as he sat upon the stile the day before.

The heat was more intense than ever; the sky of a coppery hue, even before noon; the air leaden and sultry; and yet there was no direct sunlight, only that strange yellow tint over everything. Cattle, lowing uneasily, moved about in a restless manner; the poultry in the farmyards were silent, and moped in corners. flowers hung their heads, fainting in the heat; not a leaf or blade of grass stirred. Janey Grey, standing at the Lodge gate, pointed out to George that the very aspen, whose ceaselessly quivering leaves made a ripple of light and shade all the summer through, was motionless, or nearly so—as nearly so as an aspen ever can be. About four o'clock in the afternoon a thick darkness spread over the sky, and then the storm burst right overhead, spending its whole fury upon the village. The water rushed down the street; every gutter and narrow channel became a brawling stream; the deep cutting going beyond the village and some way down the road—the cutting that for purposes of drainage had been set in hand by the curate when he first came, and completed in spite of much ignorant opposition—was full to the very brim; the thunder crashed overhead; there was scarcely an instant's pause between the flashes of forked lightning; and torrents of blinding rain, that came hissing to the ground, added to the tumult.

In the midst of this war of the elements, Mrs. Trueby, sitting, or cowering rather, in the beehive chair, alternately pressing both hands over her eyes, or clapping them to her ears, as terror at the lightning or fear of the thunder predominated, was aware, in one of those momentary

lulls that occur in the worst of storms, of the well-known tap at her door.

Terrified half out of her senses, and wondering that even the curate should come to her in weather such as this, yet with an instant feeling of relief that he was there, and that she was not to be left to die alone when the lightning should strike or the thunderbolt fall—one or other of which contingencies she firmly believed was in store for her—the old woman tottered to the door, and, with shaking fingers, drew back the bolt.

The rain dashed in—such blinding rain that even the opposite side of the road was blotted out; a louder peal than any that had yet occurred crashed overhead, and the little cabin shook to its crazy foundations, for the door seemed to have opened to admit the storm itself.

"Come in, sir, for mercy's sake, and let me get the door to!" exclaimed Mrs. Trueby; that is to say, her lips moved, for in the renewed din words were inaudible.

A stronger arm than her own helped to refasten the door and shoot again the heavy bolt; and, since she had buried her face in her hand to hide her eyes from the glare of the lightning, it was not until bolt and bar were secure that Mrs. Trueby became aware her visitor, whom she had herself admitted, and with whom she was shut up alone, was none other than Jeff Blake.

In the first moment of surprise she said nothing, but cowered down in the chair into which he thrust her violently, and only looked at him. But there was that in his look that made her forget the thunder and lightning, and that terrified her more than either. She screamed aloud, the weak quavering cry of old age.

As Jeff stooped over the corner where he had once seen her crouching, and caught at the loose end of the

board, the old woman threw herself upon him. Amidst the noise of the storm a struggle went on inside the cabin—a short one. Jeff had no time to lose. The storm was too violent to last long; his object was to get away with his plunder before it should be over, in order that the noise and tumult of it might cover his escape.

With a savage oath he thrust the old woman back into the beehive chair, winding a rope, with which he had provided himself, round both her and it, until the comfortable wicker-work contrivance became as secure a prison as could be desired for one so old and feeble. This done, he forced up the entire plank near the bed's head, and stooped to snatch the prize.

It was not there.

The flooring of the cupboard-like apartment rested only upon a rude frame of logs, by the thickness of which alone it was raised from the ground. The hole which had been so carefully prepared by Mrs. Trueby's own fingers, and in which the canvas bag had for so long reposed in safety, appeared to have been recently disturbed. Very recently it must have been, for only two days before, having had occasion to add to the hidden sum, Mrs. Trueby had counted it all out, and replaced it in its hitherto secure corner.

Jeff turned upon her savagely.

"What have you done with it?" he shouted in her ear; "speak up, or——" His tightening grasp upon her throat gave terrible significance to his words; but the next moment he relaxed his hold, for the surprise and consternation of Mrs. Trueby were too evident for even him to doubt.

"I 'ain't done nothing with it! It were safe two days

ago. Let me out! It can't be gone—not *gone!* Let me get at it?"

Thus saying, her voice scarcely audible through the noise of the storm, though that was now somewhat decreasing, with trembling hands plucking at the rope that bound her, gesticulating eagerly to Jeff, showing no more fear of him in this greater fear that possessed her now, showing only the utmost dismay at her loss, and astonishment that the money should be missing, the robber saw that at least she was not deceiving him, and moodily asked how much there had been.

"A matter of over forty pound!" she cried, moaning and rocking herself to and fro until the chair threatened to tip over with her altogether, and she made frantic efforts, bound though she was, to throw herself down on the old spot where she had been accustomed to worship this lost idol. "Over forty pound, and all gone! I be a lone woman, and they've robbed me in my sleep! Was it you, Jeff? Only tell me where it is, and what you've done with it. It can't be gone—not *gone!*"

Though he had come there to rob her, and would have robbed her now had there been anything to steal, Jeff almost felt as though he sympathised with her in some loss they had mutually sustained. The whimsical idea lasted but a moment, however, for, cursing his ill-luck in not having risked more and risked it earlier, since the prize had been so much richer than he thought, and alarmed at the inevitable consequences to himself of being found where he was, the ill-conditioned lad, regardless of his victim's entreaties to at least set her free before he went, drew back the bolt, and looked out into the now gently falling summer rain.

One keen look up and down the road, and then he

walked rapidly away towards Rye, leaving the door wide open behind him. The thunder, growling and muttering still, as the heavy clouds rolled off in the direction of Tonbridge, was growing more and more distant, and there began to be that tender shining after rain that is so great a charm of summer storms. The drops that still fell glistened brightly.

Meantime excitement, and the rude handling of the would-be robber, had done their work on the aged frame, and when George came through the wet roads at evening to see how it fared with his grandmother, she was lying, still confined to the wicker chair, insensible beside the rifled hiding-place. There was a blow on her forehead, probably the result of the fall, when her feeble struggles to escape from the prison in which she was still securely fastened, had ended in both it and its unwilling occupant coming to the ground together. In any case, and however received, the blow was severe enough to account for her being stunned, and for her remaining so long insensible that it began to be doubtful whether she would open her eyes again in this world at all.

When she did open them, it was to see the sweet face of Janey bending over her, and, in spite of pain and weakness, to be aware of a sense of home comfort, and of tenderness and affection lavished upon her, to which her cold and selfish old age had hitherto been a stranger.

Her story, of course, excited a good deal of curiosity and amazement in the village, for, since Jeff Blake had been unsuccessful in his attempt, *who* had Mrs. Trueby's money? She was quite sure she had not left the cottage at all since she had seen and counted it last. Altogether it was most mysterious, and no one liked the suspicion of there being a thief in the village; so clever a thief

too, for neither lock nor bolt had been injured. Who could feel safe for a moment? Though, to be sure, it was the woman's own fault for keeping money in that way and saying nought about it. Still, one would like to know who the thief was, unless indeed——and here superstitious old dames were found to whisper that it would be no great wonder had the Evil One, who tempted Mrs. Trueby to this sinful love of money, carried off her treasure himself. Such things had been heard of before now. But then such things were scarcely pleasanter to think of than midnight thieves themselves. Altogether, it was a most uncomfortable piece of business, and no one would feel easy till some explanation of it was discovered, which was sure to be the case sooner or later, for, as we all know, "murder will out;" and had not Mrs. Trueby been as near murdered as a woman could be to be alive after it?

Thus, and much more, the village gossips; while Janey nursed the old lady with watchful care, and Jones the constable searched high and low for the missing money or for any tidings of it. A search also was instituted by the county police for Jeff Blake, who, however, was heard of no more; he having wisely gone on board the first coasting vessel he came across, and done so under a feigned name.

"You are no worse off than you were before," the curate said gravely, when Mrs. Trueby bemoaned her loss; "indeed, you are better off, for a care and anxiety is gone from you. It is that wretched lad and the wrong you did his soul you should think of. The hoarded silver turned to something worse than dead leaves and rubbish in his case, since they tempted him to crime."

And then Mrs. Trueby would turn her face to the wall and lie silent while the curate read to her as usual; and one day he became aware that tears were stealing down the withered cheeks, and asked, as he had once asked before, what ailed her.

"My spirit be moved within me through hearing of the Word," she said in the same words in which she had replied to the question that other time, but now Mrs. Trueby had not groaned and turned up her eyes, neither was her tone acid, and no angry flush, but one of shame, dyed her cheek. So the curate got up from the wood-block on which, from force of habit, he was sitting—for he might have occupied the beehive chair now that Mrs. Trueby was in bed—and he said, not without emotion:

"God be praised! For His word is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

The good man knew that at last the closed door was open, and the ears that would have been deaf to any speech of his while secret sin stood between the soul and heaven, had heard the word of the Lord. The curate knelt by the bed with its patchwork hangings and prayed with the woman lying there—with her and for her. From that day Mrs. Trueby had no longer to complain that he spoke no word in season, nor ever expounded to her the Scripture that he read; for now that talk was no longer a mockery, they had much converse together.

Seeing that now, at all events, whatever had been the case before, the old woman was destitute, the parish pay and the gifts of the gentry, whose contributions to the yellow basins were as frequent as hitherto, though the

discovery of how their alms in money had been hoarded placed a decided check upon their purse-strings in the future, were a welcome, and indeed the only resource of her old age.

From the shock she had undergone it was soon found she would never again have the courage to inhabit her little cabin alone; and George hired a room for her in the house where he lodged himself, whither she and her wicker chair—not forgetting the bed and table, nor even the wood-block—were safely removed as soon as she was in any way fit for the exertion.

It was quite time she moved. The crazy little cupboard that, as George had once said, might almost have been knocked down by a man's fist, had been nearly blown away by the storm. Resting only on its log frame, it certainly had shifted a few inches, to the very brink of the deep cutting behind it, so that during the few days Mrs. Trueby had lain ill the water from the over-full ditch oozed in between the boards, and the whole room became too damp to be wholesome, not to mention that another storm would be likely to overturn the erection altogether.

Mrs. Trueby was glad to be safe out of it, and to find herself in the cheerful room at the other end of the village, where Janey looked in and out upon her, and where the old goodies began to stop for a chat as they passed the door; for now that she had no longer anything to conceal, visitors, towards whom she had shown herself shy and unfriendly for years, were welcome enough. There too came, on the first Friday after her removal, Fisher the relieving officer, who, if he looked a little grave, and appeared to have his confidence in Mrs. Trueby somewhat shaken, yet brought the parochial two

shillings with him. And there came Jones the constable, to ask over and over again for particulars of Jeff's attempted robbery, and to make Mrs. Trueby describe to him over and over again exactly when she had seen her money last, and exactly how and why it appeared impossible that it should have been conveyed away by mortal hands.

The old woman seemed to weary of the subject, or, what is more probable, to be ashamed of it. With the sense growing upon her day by day that the curate had spoken no more than the truth when he declared she was no worse off than she had been when the useless coin lay hidden in her house—with a dawning sense that she was even better off, save for the ill wrought to the wild lad through a temptation she placed in his way, and for the selfish hindrance of long years to the happiness of George, which it was now out of her power to further —Mrs. Trueby evaded as much as possible talking to the constable about her loss at all.

"It hadn't ought for to have been there," she said once.

"And that's a fact," replied Jones; "it had *not* ought for to have been there. Still, since there it was, and took away mysterious, it would be a satisfaction to all parties to discover the thief. You're sure now that Jeff Blake did not bamboozle you, and carry it off himself after all? Was you in your senses the whole time he spent in your room? In the interest of justice, and for to get at truth, I asks you, Mrs. Trueby, to consider whether Jeff may not have bamboozled you after all."

Poor Mrs. Trueby! It seemed her penance to be for ever relating what she would fain have been permitted to forget; to go over the story again and again the more

ashamed of it she felt, and to listen every day to the comments of her neighbours, who, even while blaming her, looked upon her with admiration, as the heroine of an adventure, and could not help feeling a sort of whimsical respect for a woman who had been rich enough to be robbed of forty pounds.

It would be impossible to describe what this woman had felt in the one awful moment when it seemed to her she had read murder in the eyes of Jeff Blake; or all she had undergone in her own mind during the illness consequent upon excitement and rough usage, and while those watching her half doubted of her recovery: impossible to describe it, since Mrs. Trueby never spoke of it herself. But certain it is she had not, even in her unimpressionable old age, gone down to the very brink of the cold waters, and slowly returned once more to the living world, without retaining a vivid sense of her feelings, or without reaping deep and lasting benefit from the ordeal.

Often and often was the remembrance before her, as she asked herself what good had her money been, or how had she looked upon it in that hour that had no room for self-deception? Even had it been safe in her grasp, what comfort could it have given at such a time? And of the things that do bring comfort, how poor had been her store.

Mrs. Grey was very indignant with Mrs. Trueby, who was now as anxious to see her grandson married to the girl of his choice as she had hitherto been indifferent. Janey's mother was more set against the marriage than ever; she seemed to regret the loss of the money more even than its former possessor, and spoke almost as though looking upon the old woman as a thief who had robbed her own flesh and blood—which, sorrowfully enough, poor Mrs.

Trueby owned was not an entirely far-fetched idea. It seemed impossible to remedy the evil she had done; many a time she fretted over that impossibility when those about her fancied she was only lamenting her loss.

And one day, opening her eyes after a comfortable dose in the beehive chair, Mrs. Trueby saw the curate standing before her, and in his hand the familiar canvas bag, somewhat dirtier than of old, and with stains on it as though it had lain in the wet, but heavy as before, and looking to her startled eyes like the ghost of a dead sin returned to haunt her.

If the mysterious disappearance of the treasure had occasioned excitement amongst the neighbours, its equally mysterious reappearance was a nine days' wonder indeed. The explanation was simple. Turning over in his mind all the circumstances of the case, the curate, shortly after Mrs. Trueby left the cabin, had the whole flooring taken up, and found, as he had begun to suspect, that the money lay untouched exactly where it had been left, only that now, through the shifting of the crazy little building from the violence of the storm, it lay under the second, instead of first, plank from the wall. The slight unevenness in the floor had first attracted his attention, and when the wet from the cutting began to ooze into the room, the curate's suspicions received strong confirmation. He explained that the impetus of the wind, which Mrs. Trueby described as threatening to lift off the roof, or carry the cabin bodily away, at the moment when she had admitted the whole force of the storm and Jeff Blake together, must have shaken and driven the flooring over the logs on which it rested, so that the little tenement was displaced and thrust a few inches nearer to the cutting.

The satisfaction of Jones the constable that no theft at all had been committed—for he felt that had there been it would have been a sort of reproach to him as guardian of law and order in the place—was only equalled by the satisfaction of the more superstitious amongst Mrs. Trueby's neighbours, that neither had there been any supernatural agency at work. Congratulations poured in upon her, but Mrs. Trueby only said to the curate:

"They tell me it were robbing the poor to take parish pay when it were not needed; if that be so, please to put some money in the plate at church for me, sir, and let George have the rest. As for me, I am a sinful old woman. I ask for nothing but a seat at George's fireside till my time come, and that you would pray the Lord to forgive my sins, and to have mercy on that poor lost lad as the temptation I drove him into led astray."

It seemed as though, now other hands had handled and other eyes had looked upon the coin, the strange unholy spell that had for so long enslaved this woman was broken through, for she took no pleasure any more in the touch or sight of her hoarded wealth, and having once counted it, and certified that the whole sum was there, could not bear to look on it again. Or it may be that in her chastened mood she feared to do so, and put the temptation from her. At all events Mrs. Trueby would have none of the canvas bag, which, with all its contents, was made over to George and Janey for their marriage portion. It was George who, as a thank-offering from himself and a gift of atonement from his old grandmother, gave the tithe of the whole sum in church at the next collection for the poor.

Thus in the end the curate's fairy tale told itself anew, and the dead leaves and rubbish turned to fairy gold—

the gold of a repentant peaceful old age for Mrs. Trueby herself, and of happiness for George and Janey.

The old woman sits in the chimney corner of a pretty cottage near the church, and not far from Rushton Lodge—the cottage Janey had long set her heart upon; and there, while George, a steady prosperous labouring man, comes and goes daily to and from his work, and his little wife keeps the hearth bright and trim, Mrs. Trueby, nursing her great-grandchildren on her knee, thinks she will by-and-by tell them the tale the curate told to her. They are not old enough to listen to it yet, however, and it is more than likely that before they are old enough Mrs. Trueby's time will be come, and the beehive chair know her no more; for she has aged very fast, more broken by that terrible day of the storm than by the actual weight of her seventy-four years. There is not a more contented woman in the place, however, though she has not been allowed quite to forget the past. One or two of the old and destitute poor owe her a grudge to this day, so sharply do the parish officials look into all cases of out-door relief—that vexed question, to which it is not wonderful the attention of the Board of Guardians should have been particularly directed after the events just narrated. Neither, perhaps, is it wonderful that the few paupers in our midst are wont to declare angrily, it is the fault of Mrs. Trueby that the guardians are more strict with regard to relief in our parish than in any other for miles round.

MASTER JUDD'S DAUGHTER.

THROUGH the deepening twilight of an evening in early spring, an old man was making his way slowly along the muddy lanes. The past winter's rain and snow had sadly broken up the roads, which in that clayey country, albeit this is not the part of the Weald where they say the clay is bottomless, needed at the best of times and in the best of weathers incessant labour to keep them in decent order. Here and there by the wayside, heaps of ironstone were in readiness for the stone-breakers. At one such heap the wayfarer paused for a moment, and muttered to himself, that should all other trades fail there was stone-breaking to look to, and a matter of six shillings a week to be earned by it. It is an ill wind that blows no one good; and if another old saying: "Poor land, poor people," be true of this district where the cold clay soil is hard to cultivate, it is true also that the roads from time to time furnish welcome employment to an impoverished people.

Somewhat cheered by his contemplation of those

heavy blocks of ironstone, or by the thoughts they suggested, the old man plodded on more resolutely than before, and seemed to carry with a lighter heart the burden he bore upon his shoulder, across which was slung a basket of the shape used by workmen for their tools, but of rather an unusual size, and apparently heavy, for the bearer bent beneath its weight, and now and then stood still to straighten himself and draw a longer breath than usual.

Nor was this basket the only one he carried; another hung upon his arm. This second basket, however, a large flat open one, was empty, save for a folded cloth, a small wooden measure, a single orange, and a few nuts that rolled about in the vacant space.

The evening was chilly, a cold mist was rising, the birds that had sung all day were silent now, the winding cross-country road was long and wearisome. The old man stumbled now and then in the uneven way, and each time he did so put a hand to the burden on his shoulder as though to steady it, and was careful to steady his own steps also, and to walk more slowly for a while.

At last the lane struck the highroad, so that the traveller came out upon a smoother and more level track. The village was in sight too; the long walk almost at an end. At the first open cottage door he paused to exchange greetings with a woman who stood there apparently on the watch for some one.

She was a hard-featured woman, whose anxious expression spoke of a struggle with poverty, and as she smiled as the old man drew near, the smile betrayed bad teeth—a peculiarity of nearly all the people in the neighbourhood, and which is said to be one of the results of the clay soil, or of the total absence of lime in the

county, and consequently in the drinking water in general use. Perhaps it might have been toothache only that gave her that anxious worried look, and made her throw her apron with a swift jerky movement round her head as she returned Master Judd's "Good-evening."

"You're late out," she said.

"It's a goodish step over to Crowhurst and back," he answered, leaning against the low fence as though not unwilling to rest, near home though he was now.

"You ain't never been that far?"

"I heard tell the horse-riders was there, and that were a chance for me. I've not let it slip neither," directing her attention by a glance to the empty basket on his arm.

"It's too far," she said; "you work too hard for your time of life: we all say the same."

"I've no mind to be a gentleman yet, in the big house yonder," answered Judd, with a gesture towards the distant workhouse just visible from that spot; "and there ain't no other chance for me to be a gentleman, by reason of which I'll work as long as I can. There was a stock of fruit going cheap; enough left at home for Club Day still, and this afternoon have paid for the whole of it, let alone a shilling over, and that's clear profit, Mrs. Ransome. Times be mending, you see. I ain't no call to get to stone-breaking just yet awhile, though I considered of it quite serious-like as I come along this evening."

"Stone-breaking!" The woman tossed her head indignantly. "Was that fruit you spoke of locked up—the fruit as you left at home?" she added in a lower tone, and drawing nearer to him as she spoke.

A frown passed over the weather-beaten face of Master

Judd—a patient face, with lines of care and trouble on it as well as those of old age; a face that might have been that of a man grown old before his time, and on whom the weight of some secret sorrow lay heavier than the weight of years.

"Have she been past then?" he asked, all the cheerful ring gone out of his voice.

"Ay, an hour or so after noon. It's a hard world; when a body's own shoe pinches they knows how to feel for others! My man ain't home yet. I doubt if you was to go on you'd find him and her both in the same place, and many another too, as has no business there."

"She has been long away this time," Master Judd remarked, rather absently and as though more occupied with his own thoughts than with the speech of Mrs Ransome—"longer than most times."

"The better for you," answered the woman shortly.

"I were in hopes she'd steadied down," he said wistfully; "there's always the hope of that when she's so long away."

"There's never no hope of it at all," exclaimed Mrs. Ransome angrily; "you do be saying that these years past, but it's the same story always, and a crying shame it is. She's back now, as she's been back before, and as she will be back again."

"Where would you have her come if not to me? Who can bear with her as I can, minding of when she was a little thing and that—minding of my missis lying in the churchyard, as would have broke her heart to see—what I see frequent? There's a deal of things to be minded and thought on. We must be patient."

The old man sighed as he spoke, and was about to start once more upon his homeward way, when his pro-

"'You ain't never had Polly with you all day!' cried Mrs. Ransome."

gress was suddenly arrested by the fact that the large low-crowned hat he wore was mysteriously tilted over his eyes from behind.

Emerging from this involuntary eclipse, it was evident that it had had upon him the same effect that the touch of some fairy wand might possibly have brought about in the good old fairy times, for the aged face on which so deep a shade of sorrow had rested only a moment before was bright with smiles, and the voice that had had such patient trouble in its tones exclaimed exultingly:

"There isn't never any knowing what she'll be after next! Did you ever see the likes of that? Why, Polly, Polly!"

An inch or so of tiny arm was thrust out from the basket Judd carried on his shoulder, and a tiny fist, close clenched, made passes in the air about his head.

"You ain't never had Polly with you all day!" cried Mrs. Ransome laughing, letting fall her apron, forgetting her toothache and her heartache both alike; "whatever will you do with her next, or wherever will you take her, or wherever will you put her for to carry her? Here she be in a tool-basket, for all the world like a hammer and a pair of pincers and tenpenny nails, and them—bless her little heart! and did it knock grandfather's hat over his eyes as sensible as could be? or I'd never have so much as guessed Polly was here at all."

With this Mrs. Ransome, in less time than it takes to tell of it, had extricated the tiny child belonging to the tiny hand, and was devouring her with kisses, comforting herself generally with her, as, Heaven be praised! child-loving women can comfort themselves at the worst of times with the helpless little creatures dear to them. Master Judd looked on smiling.

"She would come," he said.

Polly nodded. Little wasted morsel of humanity, with the curse of her mother's sin upon her, she was older than she looked, though any one ignorant of her history would have found it difficult to believe that it was more than two years since Master Judd had found a wailing infant at his door, and for its mother's sake, taken it in at once.

"Orange," said Polly, with singular distinctness.

"Hark to her!" cried Mrs. Ransome, "speaking as plain as if she was ten years old and goed to school regular, and knowed all her letters perfect."

"It's about the only word as she speaks out *very* plain, and no wonder, when she's that used to oranges and knows one so well by sight. She can say, 'Daddy' and let me know just what she wants, and chatter pretty at her play, Polly can, but it ain't every one as can understand her."

"She would go along of you, would she?"

"That was so. The basket made a fine cradle, and she's rode very comfortable, leastwise while she was asleep; it's too confining for Polly when her eyes is open. Come, my pretty, Daddy'll carry of her home on his arm while she sucks her orange."

"She do grow, to be sure," remarked Mrs. Ransome admiringly, as she placed the child in the arms of the old man; "but she must be a rare trouble to you; however you manage to do for her, I can't think."

"The trouble of her ain't nothing to the pleasure of her. We must set one thing against another, I take it, in this world; things don't seem so unevenlike in that way, as if they was looked at by themselves. Polly's a blessing anyhow."

"There's a deal of comfort in a child," observed the

woman: "now and again I fret as if it was only yesterday as our little ones was took; and then again I'm thankful they're safe where they are, when times is hard and that."

"Just so; you take and set one thing against another as I was saying of," answered the old man, holding Polly to him as though she were a great set-off indeed against any trouble in his lot. Feeling the kind pressure, and perhaps considering that they had delayed long enough, Polly, in imperative accents, exclaimed, "Home!" as she mingled orange-juice and kisses on her grandfather's grizzled beard. As was his wont, Judd obeyed at once, and the pair went on their way through the evening shadows.

Mrs. Ransome stood looking after them until they were out of sight, when a hoarse, subdued clucking, suggestive of poultry, but oddly differing from the usual noise of hens pecking about in the farm-yard, seemed to attract her attention at last. The sounds had been going on for some time, but she had not heeded them in the interest of her conversation with Master Judd. She turned now to the back of the cottage, throwing her apron once more over her head as she did so, as if, now Polly was gone, her aching teeth and the worries of her life generally had all returned upon her at once. The poultry were there, sure enough, not gone to roost as fowls at liberty had long ago done, but confined in a long narrow pen, divided into separate partitions, one for each bird, and raised some feet from the ground. These fowls were being crammed for the London market, and the pen was thus raised for the convenience of feeding them. Strangers used to wonder it should be difficult to procure fresh eggs in this part of Sussex, and that even when any

were to be had, purchasers were asked London prices for them. But so long as the higglers gave a shilling apiece for chickens as soon almost as they could take care of themselves, it was not to be expected that the cottagers, although every one who could possibly do so kept poultry, would part with their eggs when there was any chance at all of placing them under a sitting hen.

Ransome was a higgler. The light cart—a somewhat crazy one—in which he drove over the country collecting his fowls, stood in a tumble-down shed behind the house, and the pony that drew the cart looked disconsolately over the bars of the half of the same shed roughly boarded off for his accommodation. Ransome might have been well-to-do had he only been a sober man, which he was not. All his wife's efforts could not save the money they made between them from melting away at the public-house, so that no sooner had they an account at the Post-Office Savings Bank than the money had to be withdrawn in order to pay the rent, or for some other equally necessary purpose. The tumble-down condition of the shed, the rickety cart, the half-starved look of the pony, and the neglected look of the little garden, were all so much evidence of where the man's money went. Though he had started well, he had for long now been employed only by some of the Burnash people, who contracted largely for the markets. At Burnash this fatting of fowls was an established industry of the place; but Mrs. Ransome contrived to buy and cram a few on her own account, which were sent to London with those of a friend who had known her in better days and was glad to do her a good turn. By this means, amongst others, she succeeded in keeping a roof over their heads, and could look forward to nothing but the same hopeless struggle

just to keep their heads above water, in all the years, whether they were to be few or many, that lay between her and the quiet churchyard, in which early in her married life she had laid, one after another, the infants born to her,—unless, indeed, her husband should be the first to go there.

Not a cheerful prospect, not a very happy life. It may even be doubted whether the knowledge of how many of her neighbours were in the like case was much consolation to her. She had fed the fowls for the last time, locked the door of the shed, and made all fast for the night, before Ransome came home in no condition to give her the tidings of Judd and his daughter, which she had half hoped to hear.

Meantime the old man, weary enough with the long walk he had that day taken, albeit he was well used to walking great distances whenever a merry-making of any sort afforded an opportunity for the disposal of his wares, arrived at his own door so much later than usual, that most other doors were closed already for the night. His own was flung back upon its hinges. The chilly air filled the empty-looking room; it would not have been wise to keep there more than the bare necessaries of life. Master Judd's own bed in one corner (he had come home before now to find the blankets gone from that), Polly's crib, made out of an old orange box, beside it, his arm-chair, and her low stool; there was very little else of which to make an inventory. There had been a fire lit upon the hearth, but it had died out long ago, and at first sight only the cold ashes betrayed that some one had been there since early morning, when the old man and the child had gone out together. Still carrying Polly, Master Judd looked towards the corner where he had left the

fruit he hoped to sell in the village on the following day. It was gone. There would be plenty of people glad to get a stock of cheap fruit to sell again on Club Day, when one was sure of finding customers for it all, what with the women and children who must be treated to something or other, and the boys, whose half-pence would be burning holes in their pockets; there were not wanting either those dishonest enough to take this particular fruit, sure to have been offered at less than half its value, even though they might give a good guess where it came from; Master Judd knew that. He turned towards the bed.

Yes, she was there, as he had seen her times and times before, as he feared to see her many times again. Master Judd's daughter had come home.

It was no uncommon story. Only a cook that could never keep her place. Of course it was no one's fault if after the fires she had been accustomed to, those in the large grates of a London house had been too trying, and the brandy bottle handy always. Her mistress only remarked that cooks were sadly often given to drink; but if one could not resist the temptation, why, give her warning; another could easily be found. Having once lost her character from this cause, Judd's daughter had gone from bad to worse, coming home always when out of place, and at such times, whenever she could contrive to do so, selling anything she could lay her hands on in order to procure the poison for which she craved. On one of these home-comings she brought Polly in her arms, left her at her father's door, and went away again at once. It was hard on Master Judd, the neighbours said, but Polly had proved a blessing.

"Who dat?" she demanded now, looking down with wondering eyes upon this strange figure on the bed.

Perhaps some people might not have told her who it was; her grandfather did not hesitate.

"It be your mammy," he said.

"Not Mammy Ransome; not Mammy Huggins." Polly wondered still. She did not know this woman, and the hitherto motherless child had a "mammy" in half the houses in the village.

"It be your *own* mammy," Judd said with sad emphasis.

It was not till the next morning, when Polly was at play in the sunshine before the door, that the woman noticed her. The village was all astir with the excitement of Club Day. The men belonging to the benefit club were assembling, early as it was, for the long walk through the winding lanes to church, after which would come the dinner at The Woolpack Inn. The street was gay with flags, a triumphal arch of evergreen stretched across it in one place; women and girls dressed in their Sunday clothes loitered about, the women forgetful just now of the monthly payment of that half-crown they so sorely grudged at times, and thinking more of the eight to ten shillings a week that could be claimed in time of sickness; the girls thinking solely of the day's merry-making, their new bonnets, or their lovers, as the case might be. Itinerant vendors of fruit and gingerbread cried their wares already, although they looked to doing a brisker trade later in the day. It was a great day at the shop too. Many of the good housewives in distant cottages made Club Day the excuse for coming in to settle their accounts, not to mention the better-off amongst the inhabitants of the village, with whom it was an annual custom to pay their bills at this time, or the shopkeepers from the neighbouring town, with whom

weightier matters of wholesale bargaining had to be arranged. There was a cake and a bottle of wine in readiness in the little parlour behind the shop, and a friendly welcome for all comers—at least, for all who did not come empty-handed.

"It's expected of one, but it runs a body off their legs with so many coming in and out," said the mistress, and indeed her son and the shop-boy had enough to do to attend to the constant stream of petty purchasers, so that the burden of hospitality was left to her alone.

Boys blew penny trumpets, a fiddler stood in the road and played; at last the men were ready, and the procession started, each man carrying the tall peeled osier wand. Farther on, much nearer the church, they would be joined and headed by the squire himself, the oldest member of the club, and who would be sorely missed when the day came for the honoured silvered head to be seen no more in front of the procession. It was not to be hoped the young squire would ever take his place. Old customs are dying out, old ties breaking everywhere between rich and poor.

Polly was sitting on the door-step when the men tramped past. She laughed and clapped her hands; many of the men gave her a kind word, laughing back at her as they went. Master Judd, having nothing to take him out, since he had nothing left to sell, rested in his arm-chair within the room, which was too low and narrow for the sunshine to penetrate there, or light up the shameful figure, dirty and unkempt, of Polly's "own mammy," who leant against the wall in the darkest corner of the room and watched the child at her play.

"She was that peaky as a baby, I never thought to see ner so pert as she be now," murmured the woman, with

a strange dawning of maternal affection in her face. "I never thought to see her at all for that matter. Who done for her?"

"Polly and me, we've pretty well done for ourselves," began Master Judd; hastening to add, as the thought struck him that possibly here might be the charm to make his daughter "steady down" at last, "but we shall be main glad to have you do for us."

She shook her head, and said she must see about finding another place. As the days went by, however, she was still at home, and often sober for a longer time together than her father had remembered her for many years. She took in a little washing, and between that and the stone-breaking, for which the old man had applied at once, they contrived to live, while the newly-awakened love for her child grew daily stronger. The two were seldom apart. As time went on it grew a familiar sight to Polly this of a drunken woman reeling home, of a shameful figure stumbling across the threshold, of a woman lying heavily asleep in the bright sunshine all day long, and never answering when Polly called to her to wake.

On such occasions the child soon learnt to wait patiently until her mother was herself again; or Polly would now and then lose patience, and set off alone down the road where her grandfather was at work. When he saw the little one coming towards him, he knew how matters were at home; but after each outbreak hoped anew, after each disappointment repeated his unfailing "we must be patient." There was at least this much ground for hope—a sense of shame seemed to have been born in this woman with the new love for her innocent child. This was strikingly apparent one warm summer

afternoon, when Polly and her mother sauntered down the road together to where the old stone-breaker sat beneath the hedge. Polly was as usual awe-struck at the sight of the horn spectacles her grandfather used to protect his eyes; she never seemed to know him till he took them off, but that done ran to him, chattering in the speech that was plainer now than in the spring—children learn quickly when once they begin to speak at all.

To see the three thus sitting in the shade together, the old man listening with a smile to Polly's talk, his idle hammer lying at his feet, and his daughter looking, as she sometimes could look, respectable enough to *be* his daughter, any one might have fancied them a happy and contented family; nor was there anything to suggest the secret trouble of their lives. It was Polly who unconsciously brought back the shade to the brow of her grandfather, and dyed with a crimson stain the cheek of her mother.

A party of tramps turned a corner in the lane, and were seen coming towards the spot. Master Judd, giving them a keen glance, had just observed there was no need to take any notice, for the best thing to do was to let them go quietly by, when Polly cried out that there was "another own mammy coming," and pointed with a tiny finger to one amongst the approaching group—that one was a red-faced woman, reeling as she walked.

The first impulse of the little creature's mother was to administer an angry shake, and exclaim: "Drat the child! whatever does she mean!" though the flush upon her cheek betrayed her correct interpretation of the artless speech.

"Own mammy," repeated Polly, nestling in the safe shelter of her grandfather's arms, and peeping out to

watch the woman as she passed. To the child's infant mind this was like none of the other mammies she had ever known; like only to the one by her side now, and whom, after all, she loved better than any of the others.

That this was the light in which she appeared to her child, that the very name by which she knew her mother was in Polly's childish fancy the sign and bore the meaning only of degradation such as this, made an impression upon Judd's daughter such as nothing else ever had done yet. For weeks after that the cottage was orderly and neat; its appearance, no less than that of Polly and her mother themselves, gave unmistakable evidence of at least temporary improvement. Judd began to feel more easy in his mind as he went day by day to his work, and could hope that on his return he would find Polly's mother doing no worse than standing gossiping at the open door, perhaps even see her coming to meet him, the little one holding by her skirts or running on before.

Another sign from which there was reason to hope the struggle had begun between this woman's better nature and the fatal temptation that had so long enslaved her, was that there were days when she fled from it. Taking the child in her arms, and locking the cottage door behind her, she would turn her back upon the village, and glancing over her shoulder towards the public-house standing so conveniently in the midst of the other houses, would walk for hours in a swift, eager way, as though the goal before her was far off, and her purpose was to reach it speedily, or as though—which truly was the case—some danger she was trying to escape from dogged her steps.

Polly liked these walks. The child sang and prattled to herself, one little thin arm round her mother's neck,

until her innocent enjoyment seemed to soothe and certainly helped to strengthen the poor thing whom Polly's tiny hand was leading heavenwards at last.

Seeing them pass thus, the woman with a set frown upon her face, and never pausing to exchange a greeting with any one upon the way, only walking with hasty tread, and that backward glance from time to time as though she were visibly pursued by some evil thing, one and another of the neighbours, most of whom knew too well how pressing was the danger, and what good hope of safety lay in flight, would speak to each other gently of Judd's daughter, and watch for her to pass by towards evening upon her homeward way. Then she would be wearied in body, but listening with a smile to Polly's chatter, walking slowly with the little girl's hand in hers, and the evil spirit conquered and driven forth for once, so that she was ready to exchange friendly words with those she had passed in such fierce dogged silence earlier in the day.

"It's Polly as is pulling her mother straight; my last days is like to be my best," remarked Master Judd to his neighbour Mrs. Huggins. She had been ailing all the summer, and was that evening sitting at her open door and supping "kettle broth," on which she was supposed to be getting up her strength.

For the information of those to whom this valuable form of nourishment is unknown, it may be well to explain that it consists of pieces of stale bread liberally moistened with boiling water and besprinkled with salt and pepper. Huggins himself was taking his pint in the tap-room of The Woolpack Inn; but then Huggins was a strong man, and needed, or so he considered, the said pint to keep up his strength, so that there might continue to be a bread-

winner able to supply with kettle broth the sickly woman at home. True, the price of the pint, to say nothing of the price of the other pints it led to, might have enriched the mess, but that fact did not seem to occur to Master Huggins, nor perhaps to his wife either. The wives of such men often accept their lot with dumb patience.

"Ain't you feared she'll do the little 'un a hurt some of these days?" asked Mrs. Huggins: "not meaning to say nothing unkind of one who we all see is mending her ways, Polly's mother ain't fit at all times to have the care of a child."

"She's done her no harm yet; I was timersome at first, but the Lord gave Polly to my poor girl, and what's best for one of 'em is best for both. I never felt as I had a right to meddle with 'em."

What was to follow was best, no doubt for the poor mother, but—best for little Polly? And yet, who dare judge?

One morning when the old man was away and would not be back till nightfall, with the terrible thirst upon her, so that it seemed almost as if a strong hand were dragging her towards the danger she struggled to escape, Judd's daughter pulled the door to violently, and clasping Polly so tightly in her arms that the child was half frightened, went a few yards up the road. Only a few; Ransome driving his light cart met her and pulled up for a moment. Under the net at the back of the cart a whole lot of fowl were secured; Ransome was on his way to his employers to hand over the fowl and account for the money paid for them. The sight of the poor birds delighted Polly, whose mother held her up to look at them.

"Going on one of them long walks of yours?" said Ransome, a hearty, neighbourly man enough when sober,

and, like every one else in the place, a friend of Polly's; "s'pose you hand up the little one and let me give her a ride. I be bound to pass your door on the way home, and can set her down. The lift of her ain't considerable, but you'd walk lighter without her, if walk you must."

Polly held up her arms and clamoured to get into the cart. For one moment her mother hesitated; in the next the Tempter had whispered of a day alone, unwatched by those innocent eyes, a day in which she would be free to do as she liked, and yield to this fierce longing that seemed to drag her with a material force, when the means were procurable of satisfying it at once. She lifted Polly to the seat beside Ransome and watched them drive away in the sunshine. And then alone, with no clinging arm about her neck, no soft cheek pressed to hers, no lisping voice at her ear, the very semblance of a fight was at an end; with a covert smile upon her face, she retraced the few steps already taken, and—but what need is there to continue? When Master Judd returned that evening, the old sad sight awaited him, the sight he had almost hoped never to see again. Nor did he. That occasion was the last on which the trembling old hands made fast the door to hide his daughter's shame, and strove to arrange decently the disordered garments of the woman lying senseless on the hearth. There was nothing to tell him then, however, that he had done these things for the last time; it was with the old patient sigh that he sat down to rest, wondering a little which amongst Polly's many friends had taken charge of her, but too tired just then to go and see. Nor, feeling happily confident the child was in safety somewhere or other, did he do more than from time to time wonder in the same vague way where she was, until the short sum-

mer night was over, and the return of day brought back life and movement to the village.

When, however, Polly's mother, roused at last from her heavy stupor, asked for the little girl and seemed surprised to find her absent, though evidently with some confused idea that she knew or ought to know what had become of her, Judd took alarm, and the father and daughter went out into the street together.

The fresh, sweet air still further dispersed the fumes of alcohol in the brain of the unhappy woman, who began now to recollect when she had last seen Polly and to whose care she had entrusted her.

"Give her to Ransome, did you?" said Master Judd; "well, he'll have brought her back, found you—not exactly fit to mind her, say, and took her home along of him. It's as plain as print; and she might have been worse off."

"She *would* have been worse off, left with me."

The old man looked at her with the wistful patient glance habitual to him.

"We was very comfortable—we *have* been comfortable off and on ever since you come back last; we will be so again," he said.

She threw up her hands with a sudden passionate gesture, and cried out that she was tired of it all, and would stay there no longer.

"There's places to be had where folks ain't particular—places good enough for me."

A little group had gathered about the open shop door some paces down the street, and seeing idlers about, she said she would just ask at what hour Ransome had gone by on the last evening, and then step up the road and fetch the child home.

Mrs. Duff was at the shop door herself, bargaining with a lad who carried a basket of dead poultry on his arm. The unusual sight of even Mrs. Duff indulging in the purchase of such a luxury as chickens for the table, seemed to have attracted the attention of one of the neighbours passing at the time, for just as Judd's daughter came up, this woman stopped to exclaim that poultry must be going uncommon cheap that morning.

"It *is* going cheap," said the lad; "now's your time if you never had a roast fowl to your dinner in your life before. The money must be turned upon 'em somehow."

"Whose be they?—why, they be all wet! drownded?"

"Just that; drowned dead every feather of em'," repeated the lad, "and for that very reason going cheaper than fowls ever went before. Since they ain't lived to be crammed, you may cram yourselves with 'em if you please;" with which small joke he turned to offer the birds to one and another of the women standing by.

"Haven't you heard?" said Mrs. Duff to the woman who had spoken last; "they were Ransome's. The cart was found driven right into one of the old gravel-pit ponds, and the birds all drowned. The poor pony had struggled half out; but if they hadn't found him when they did the weight of the cart would have dragged him back before long."

"And the man?"

"Dead," answered Mrs. Duff in a low voice; "he must have fallen off into the water: they took him out quite dead."

At that moment a hand seized Mrs. Duff; Judd's daughter grasped her arm.

"Ay, it is a lesson for you and the likes of you," said the mistress of the shop, shaking her off angrily, and

under the impression that early in the day though it was, the woman was not sober; "we all know you are very little better than Ransome was. See what he's come to, and let it be a warning to you. Have done! behave yourself!" she concluded, as Polly's mother, choking with an emotion that for the moment rendered speech impossible, actually shook the respectable Mrs. Duff, as though by that means she would have shaken out of her the answer to a question not yet put.

"Polly! my Polly! she were along of Ransome," the mother contrived to gasp out at last.

The moment the words were heard a change came over her audience. Mrs. Duff herself was the first to take the poor creature by the arm, to turn with eager questions to those near, to offer one suggestion after another. In the face of so terrible a calamity there was no lack of sympathy even with Master Judd's daughter, who had so often forfeited her claim to respectability that she was looked upon as an outcast by the decent women who formed the little group around her at that instant.

All that could be learnt was that Ransome had never reached his employer's farm at all; that, seeking him in the early summer dawn, and having good reason, from his well-known habits, to guess at the cause of his non-appearance, the cart had been found as described, in one of the ponds of a byroad on which Ransome had no business to be driving at the time, for it was out of the direct way, from which, however, a certain lonely public-house situated hereabouts had before now tempted him to wander. After the body was discovered, in such shallow water near the pond's edge that had the man been even half sober he might have saved himself with

ease, they sent for his wife, but as no one knew he had had a child with him, no search was made for Polly.

The search was made in good earnest now. Since her first agonised cry the mother had not spoken, had only turned a haggard face and yearning eyes from one to another, as questions were put and answered, explanations given, and suggestions made. Having by this means learnt the little there was to learn, she started to seek the child, started with much the same hasty step and dogged silence it had been her habit to maintain in those other walks of hers. Nor did she set off alone; there was no lack of help offered or of advice given; women, mothers themselves, kept her company upon the road, men sacrificed a day's work to look for Polly. But Polly's mother distanced them all. Stopping at every door she passed, inquiring of every living creature that she met, making her way to the fatal pond, where, however, nothing further had been found, pausing for neither rest nor food, never speaking except to put the one question always on her lips—all through that day, all through the night that followed, Judd's daughter walked on and on; walked alone at last, for one by one friends and neighbours had dropped away, wearied out, or hopeless of the result.

The mother alone never wearied, never gave up hope, and late on the second day, bearing a wee pale burden in her arms, she stepped across her father's threshold, and laying Polly on the bed, sank fainting to the ground.

The child had been found in a wayside hut, on the edge of a bare common, crossed by the steep stony road which, after passing the public-house already mentioned, came out on to the highroad towards Burnash. It could only be guessed that, tempted by the wish to give Polly

a thorough treat, Ransome soon after leaving the village had turned aside towards the downs, and in order to prolong the child's pleasure, instead of taking the direct way had driven along the cross-country roads, where he was in the habit of calling at outlying farms and cottages. Those who knew him knew how many pauses for refreshment there must have been in such a drive as this, and in what state he was likely to have been by the end of it. Probably, as time wore on, he had become in a confused way aware of how late it was growing, and anxious to make up for his too long delay, for he had been seen driving furiously down the steep road across the common, upon which road, as the old furze-cutter was returning to his lonely hut at evening, he had found little Polly lying white and still. In all probability she had been thrown from her perilous seat beside the intoxicated driver without his even missing her when she fell.

The furze-cutter had carried her home, and after a time she recovered consciousness; and it was there her mother found her.

"It be some bad hurt to her back," the man had said; "you didn't ought to move her till a doctor see to it."

"She will lie easy in my arms," answered the woman. How many miles she walked that day she could hardly have told; but through it all there was no movement of the tired arms that could so much as stir Polly's little frame. Not till she had placed the child in safety did the strength of Master Judd's daughter give way.

Polly's spine was injured; she is a cripple for life.

And here the pen may be laid down, for the tale is told of how it came about that Judd's cottage is haunted by a sweet household spirit, a pale and patient little

creature, lying on its couch before the open door in summer, or in the chimney-corner when the days are cold, and doing—as unconsciously as when in her infancy she did it for her mother—an angel's work in our midst, for Polly's very presence amongst us is a silent sermon against the prevailing evil of the place.

Thus it came about that Master Judd's daughter is a sober woman, and that if any influence is stronger in the village than that of Polly's presence, it is the influence of Polly's mother.

It cannot be said that *she* is silent. When other arguments fail of effect, when any one withstands her for long together and is hard to persuade, she will point to the feeble form and white bloodless face of her child, and passionately bid them look there, and see what drink *did* for her.

"Don't *I* know how the devil drags you poor souls the wrong way?" she exclaims, "but, drat him! while I've a hand left to catch hold with, I'll drag too!"

Master Judd's daughter is not a refined person—only a poor servant, who lost place after place through drink, and has had a hard lesson and learnt it in the end.

As for Master Judd, he is a gentleman now, and that without seeking the shelter of the workhouse—a gentleman, as they say in these parts of a man who does no work. His old age wants for no comfort with which his daughter's industry can supply him, and she will not allow him to do more than watch over Polly, Polly's mother being at hand always to watch over them both.

We noticed that from the first she never cast upon Ransome the blame of the child's accident. It is perhaps because of this that Mrs. Ransome neighbours more with Judd's daughter than with any one else; perhaps

because no stone is ever flung by the hand of his victim upon the memory of the dead man, that these two women have become friends for life. After Ransome's tragic death his widow moved into the cottage next door to Judd's, where she and Polly's mother take in most of the washing to be had for miles round the village, and are known as the best laundresses in the place.

"What is best for one is best for both of them," the old man had once said, and it must be that it *is* "best" for Polly to lie there—maimed and crippled from her infancy. It may even be that some special blessing rests upon an innocent life, the sacrifice of which, albeit involuntary, has reclaimed another, for Polly is strangely happy; go when you will, you find her patient, cheerful, and content.

TWO GIRLS.

THE storm had raged since early morning. Great waves dashed over the Esplanade, here and there a breach had been made in the sea-wall, and the road in front of the houses was broken and cut up. On the Marina water streamed into the areas; the wind, catching up the pebbles from the beach as though they had been grains of sand, flung them against the windows of the houses, some of which had their basement floors completely flooded. Robertson Street was a canal; they were going about there in boats, rescuing people and household furniture; the sea and the waves raged horribly, and over the wild scene the sky hung dark with clouds.

From the windows of a fashionable house on the Esplanade two girls watched the storm. The cheeks of one were flushed and her eyes bright.

"It is grand! Do you often have such storms as this, Ruth?" she said.

Her companion, a slight pale girl, standing rather behind Pearl Hayward, and showing unmistakably by her

dress and demeanour, or so some people might have said, that that was the proper place for her to stand in, did not answer. She, too, looked at the chaos of wind and water outside, but with an expression not so much of fear as of anger on her white face. Her lips were pressed together tightly, her eyes shone.

"It is New Year's Day too," Pearl went on; "what can the New Year be bringing that it is ushered in like this? How the house rocks—ah!" A green wall of water came on towards the town; the huge wave curled over, broke, dashed high upon the road, the whole air was filled with spray. When Pearl could see clearly again, there were planks and beams of wood showing dark upon the sea, that tossed them hither and thither—the pier-head had been carried away. Ruth spoke then.

"Three hundred years ago, when they were building the pier, the sea rose like that with a strong south-east wind, and swept the works away in one hour, so I've heard tell."

"A spring-tide with the equinox, I suppose," observed Pearl.

"They called it 'the mighty power of God;' it stands so in an old mention of it in the town records; I've heard father talk of it," said Ruth, turning away to fold piles of silk and dress materials which littered the sofa.

"I am glad we do not live lower down—the houses are flooded on the Marina. I wonder St. Leonards should have been built so low down, since it seems even three hundred years ago people knew the ways of the sea at high tides, and the ground rises at the back of the town. Are we safe here, Ruth?"

"I never heard any one speak of danger—not up here—though father do say now and then that the sea will have its own some of these days."

"Its own?"

"Yes; the country right away over the marshes towards Winchelsea. The salt water was out there through the storms last November; the sheep were drowned by scores. It lies so low, that marsh land. The sea was there once, and father says it will be there again. In summer, when the marsh is pretty dry, and many of the water-courses empty, and the flowers out, and the sun striking down so that it's like crossing a desert plain to walk on it, you wouldn't think much about the sea; but it is dreadful to remember it was there once, and it will come again."

Pearl had been struck with the desolate look of the marshes as the train from London passed in sight of them, lying dull and gray beneath the watery sky, and with a white gleam of water shining here and there upon them. She said so now.

"Is that your home, Ruth?—a dreary dismal place to live near."

"Father don't live just there; not Winchelsea way, but towards Hurstmonceux" ("Orsemonsoo," Ruth called it); "a pleasanter place ever so much, but marsh land still. Right away up to the hills was under water once, and will be again. The sea takes all."

"But not in our time," Pearl laughed gaily. "Four hundred years ago there were ships in the Camber, where cattle and sheep feed to-day; I know that, and four hundred years hence it may be so again—but not in our time."

"I don't like to think of it," said Ruth, giving again

one of those half-frightened half-angry glances at the green waves.

"Why do you live here if you hate the sea so much?—and you do hate it, Ruth—why do you live here till you are obliged to do so?"

"I had to be doing something," answered the little dressmaker. "All my people but just father himself were seafaring, so that we have friends in Hastings. I've done pretty well on the whole. This dress is to come home first then, miss? I shall be pleased to make it; but, indeed, your own work is so beautiful I am half ashamed of mine beside it; I never knew before that ladies worked like this."

"Ladies! It is my one accomplishment, but it is a rare one; give me all the credit of it if you please, Ruth. I've been obliged to make my things. Though I live with my uncle and aunt in this smart house, and in a smarter one still when we are up in London, I am poor myself. Only for having too much to do, the time being so short to do it in——" Pearl left her speech unfinished. She lifted one of the pieces of stuff and let it fall in folds to the ground, as though wholly occupied in judging of the effect. The waves still thundered upon the beach outside, and the house shook, but Pearl was musing happily over what the New Year was to bring to her. The other girl watched her in silence for a moment, then a half-smile broke over the pale face of Ruth.

"I am very glad, miss, that you needed help; it is a good thing for me," she said, thinking also that it was good for her that the young lady was not rich enough to employ a fashionable milliner in place of such a humble little needlewoman as Ruth herself. She made up her parcel then, and prepared to set out, though Pearl asked

how she expected to be able to keep her feet in the high wind. Ruth declared it was quieter in the shelter of the houses at the back than might be supposed from the way it blew in front. She could get back as she had come, she said, though it would be necessary to take a long round, both to keep in shelter of the quiet streets and to avoid those that were flooded on her way to the little house, high and dry on the rising ground towards the castle. The first of these two motives could not have influenced her much, however, or, perhaps, since she had lived in Hastings she had grown accustomed to the high winds that had been higher than ever that winter, for on leaving the house Ruth stood for many minutes facing the sea, and looking upon the tumult of waves, the floating planks, and the confusion generally. When she turned away at last her lips were moving. She was speaking to herself aloud, which any one might safely do just then without fear of being overheard, so overpowering was the noise made by the backward rush of the tide as it hissed over the shingle. The ceaseless roar drowned every other sound.

"I hate it! Yes, I do hate it! Miss Hayward was right," Ruth was saying.

Girls and boys alike in Sussex villages within reach of the wide marsh lands seem to find the goal of their ambition in the seaside towns. Even from sleepy hamlets beneath the Downs, Brighton lures away the wilder spirits, and the sea's salt breath, that hovers for ever over the marshes, appears to wake some strange longing in the heart of the solitary "looker" going to and fro amongst the flocks of sheep and cattle, and to speak to him of the free seafaring life so many of his forefathers have led. Lads who cannot be content at home find

their way to Winchelsea, Rye, Hastings; and where they go what more natural than that the lasses should follow by-and-by?

It had been thus with Ruth. In her native village nearly everyone had relatives amongst the seafaring population of the coast. When south-east winds swept across the marsh lands, and the sea covered it here and there, as though the time were really at hand when it would claim its own again, more than one mother's heart was filled with anxiety, and maidens would steal out to stand watching which way the clouds drifted, and think of their lovers away with the fishing-boats. Then the charms of Hastings were manifold. The girls all tried to get into service there, London itself had not half the attractions in their eyes, nor in those of their mothers, who felt their daughters quite out of reach and lost to them in the great city. In the gay watering-place one could see and be seen, for the sternest of mistresses must perforce permit of church-going, so that one's best bonnet could be exhibited from time to time, while those mistresses who were not stern, and allowed of frequent "Sundays out," were eagerly sought after; and yet from Hastings one could so easily get home.

There were other ties to the place, other links between the town and many a quiet hamlet far removed from its gay and busy scenes. Many a one amongst the sick poor had been sent to the Hastings Infirmary, and had returned to cottages amongst leafy lanes and hop-grounds, or to straggling villages bordering on the marsh lands, to tell of fresh sea breezes, and repeat such tales as, after being discharged from the Hospital, a patient might contrive to pick up at the "Fisherman's Home," in the sailors' quarter.

The little old-fashioned public-houses frequented by the fishermen were the places in which to seek for lads who had run away from the plough or grown disgusted with a quiet life. The lasses must be sought for behind shop counters, or in the service of the lodging-house keepers on the Esplanade, or in the more fashionable streets, such mistresses always preferring country girls, and setting their faces against those born and bred in Hastings itself. Ruth, however, would have been found in neither place.

She had grown up in the village near the marsh, and, keeping her father's house, had led a quiet retired life a little apart from girls of her own age, for by her mother's death Ruth was enrolled early amongst village housewives, and had less leisure than her young companions. Her father was a shepherd.

In spring great flocks of sheep, coming to feed awhile on the salt marshes, covered miles and miles on their way. Ruth liked to see them pass, and know how nearly their journey was at an end, as she watched the patient creatures lying down to rest upon the dusty road, and noticed how careful the men were not to overdrive their charges. The whole village, and miles of solitary road on either side of it, resounded with bleating. Foot-passengers turned aside wherever they could into the fields and meadows, in order to avoid the overpowering clouds of dust raised by the strange hushed tramp of so many thousand feet, and the oppressive air heated by the presence of the crowded flocks. Those who were driving turned back if possible, if not, resigned themselves as patiently as might be to the slow progress at foot-pace amongst the sheep, who had it all their own way for once, and impeded the Queen's highway for leagues.

Careful housewives closed doors and windows to keep out the dust, but Ruth stood at her little gate, for the passing of the flocks was one of the events in her quiet year, and she took a strange pleasure in it. "He knoweth His sheep, and calleth them all by their name," were words that now and then rose unbidden to her mind.

Living so much alone, Ruth had grown thoughtful, and was full sometimes of vague fancies that did not come naturally to other village maidens. From her school-days she had been a favourite at the Vicarage, and later, when she proved so handy with her needle that her vocation in life seemed to be clearly marked out, was frequently employed there. The clergyman and his wife, a kind old couple, living out their declining years in that retired spot, and scarcely conscious how very far removed they were mentally from the rush and stir of the younger world around them, lent her books without much consideration of the effect they had upon the dreamy girl. Ruth was a great reader, she delighted in her own fashion in a volume of Tennyson's Poems, borrowed again and again from the dim study where the white-haired Vicar sat amongst his books, and smiled benignly at the singular taste Ruth evinced in the choice she made. It was the descriptions of natural scenery that awoke Ruth's taste for poetry. Who knew better than she did how it looked when

> The wild marsh-marigold shines like fire,
> In swamps and hollows gray?

Ruth liked to go out on the marshes when the marigold was in flower, and the tall bulrushes, and when strange water-plants were to be had for the seeking. Her father, returning from his visits to the scattered flocks, often

found her coming to meet him, threading her way as easily as he did himself between the frequent water-courses. He was fond of telling her how the sea had washed, a thousand years ago, over the spot they stood on, of prophesying that so it would be again, and of making her notice how salt was the brackish water here and there when there had been a high spring-tide at Hastings.

It was a mystery to Ruth how the marsh could be affected by the sea. If it were to come rolling in with great waves from that line against the horizon, she could have understood it then. Sometimes she wondered why it did not do so, what there was to prevent it, so low and level did the land stretch away, and, in stormy weather when the sea-line was dark, look actually lower than the sea itself. At such times, especially if the south-east wind were blowing, there seemed to Ruth no escape, no barrier between her and the on-coming waves ready to overspread the marsh. The waves did nothing of the sort, however, and yet, in stormy years, the salt water was there—always there. She grew to look upon it with a sort of terror—a terror increased by her father's assertion that the sea would surely claim its own some day.

It had claimed much already, Ruth thought. Two of her father's brothers and three of their young sons had gone down in the rude boats in use upon the coast—which, one would imagine, are as ill-suited as boats could be to the storms they are sure to meet with.

And yet, though she hated it, the sea had the same fascination for Ruth as for so many others. Did the salt smell, and the salt spray dashed into her face by every high wind, whisper to her as it seemed to do to the marsh flowers? Or was it only that Ralph Severn had wearied of an inland life and was at Hastings?

Ruth wished her lover could have stayed content at home. They had "walked" together through two summers—pleasant summers to Ruth—and might have looked to be married before another had passed away. But the wandering spirit seized upon Ralph and called him away to the coast, which he had all his life visited off and on—indeed, he had been used as a lad to go out in his father's boat. It was only when that boat, having set sail one morning with the rest, never returned again, but went down in one of the wild storms on the rocky coast, that Ralph, who happily had not been in it that day, went to live with his grandmother in the inland village. He had always chafed more or less at the quiet life, and by-and-by, when an opening presented itself for a return to the perilous trade of his father, not even Ruth could keep him by her side. She had good reason to hate the sea, she said to herself; it took her lover from her.

Ralph was doing well. Already he had two shares in a fishing-boat, and the favourite dream of his life began to look not so very far off and unattainable as it had once done. This dream was to have a boat entirely his own. When that day came, if it ever did come, he told Ruth his boat should bear no other name than hers. He not only described to her the little house in the sailors' quarter they would soon inhabit together, but painted in glowing colours the charms of Hastings generally. Thus, whether owing to the same stirring of the fancy that had called away so many of her people, or only to the natural wish of having her life cast in the same place as Ralph's, until the day came when, with prudence, their two lives might become one, Ruth went.

She went first as an apprentice to one of the smaller and less expensive establishments in the town, but as

soon as she was able, set up a modest business of her own. The mistress of one of the lodging-houses on the Marina was a friend of hers, and had come from the same village. This woman recommended Ruth to her lodgers, and to others, so that she soon had enough to do, and might have been seen almost daily on the Esplanade as she went to and fro. She lodged, however, far away from the newer and gayer St. Leonards, in a small house standing back from the road in one of the old-fashioned steep streets leading towards the castle.

Here there lived a widow woman who had known Ruth's mother, and indeed all her people, and who was glad to receive the girl, and take as much care of her as though she had been her own. If Ruth had not had such a respectable home and such a motherly person to look after her, her father would never have allowed her to live in Hastings by herself, neither would Ralph have been pleased.

It was to this little house in old Hastings that Ruth, walking slowly against the wind, which now and then threatened to take her off her feet altogether, made her way that New Year's morning. Mrs. Morrison was on the look-out for her. It was pleasant to find the midday meal prepared, and a friendly welcome ready, even though Ralph had not come up with news of the storm and the mischief it had done, as Ruth had half hoped might be the case. Some one said the Beach cottages had been carried away; there must surely have been serious damage done in the sailors' houses, and the sheds where they kept their nets. That the sea-wall itself had here and there been powerless to resist the waves had given Ruth a terrible idea of their force, and made her feel nervous, though it was not storms such as this that seafaring folk

dreaded, and that made the hearts of wives and mothers stand still with fear. There was no fishing-boats out to-day; it was far too bad for that.

Mrs. Morrison had not as many questions us usual about Ruth's work and about the young lady by whom she was just now employed. The widow generally liked to hear anything there was to tell when her lodger came home, but to-day the attention of Mrs. Morrison wandered. The sea seemed to be in all her thoughts.

"It reminds me of your mother," she said to Ruth; "when the sea and the waves roared, and the Lord caused a strong wind to blow, many's the time she has run in to tell me how thankful she was that her own lot was to be cast in green pastures far away. Your father was the only one of all the brothers who was not a sea-faring man. My own boys were alive then, but the sea takes all;" as she spoke she turned her eyes to where the dark tossing waters showed above the roofs of the opposite houses, but went on speaking in a low quiet voice: "It is a good trade, though, one fit for a man, and the Lord can say, 'Peace, be still,' to the winds and waves. There are worse storms than those on the ocean; who knows but the waves of this troublous world may wash over that young lady as you've taken such a liking to, while you, Ruthie, ride safe at anchor on a sunny sea? Ralph gets on finely."

"I wish he got on in any other way," exclaimed Ruth; "he might if he'd only listened to me. Though he started as nothing but a 'looker' on the marshes, that would have led to better things; father does well enough. It is safe there in the village."

"No safer than here. I've heard say the sea comes there too, as if to remind one that trouble can make its

way anywhere. Ralph had an opening here, and I, for one, don't blame him. It's a man's life, and when there's no duty in the way, a woman shouldn't go against it."

"I don't go against it," said Ruth pettishly.

"Nay, but you worry him with regrets. I speak for your own good. There's many a lass would be proud to see Ralph come and go, knowing how well he's thought of in his dangerous business."

A frown passed over the brow of Ruth. She pushed away her plate, and, leaving her meal unfinished, declared she must get to work at once if Miss Hayward's dresses were to be done in time. Ruth knew that many girls envied her her handsome brave lover, and thought her a fool for beseeching him not to go out with the boat in rough weather, and standing with a white angry face as the lumbering old craft left the shore, instead of waving her hand cheerily and wishing him good luck. Ruth herself thought that if they were once married she could bear it better; other wives appeared to grow used to it, and she supposed it would be the same with her. But there was no talk of the marriage just yet. Instead of that, Ralph was talking of buying another share in the boat, so that it would belong to himself and one partner alone, when there was no doubt that a good thing might be made of it. It had been a great shock to Ruth when Ralph first spoke to her of this scheme. Her own savings were mounting up, and she had hoped that his also were laid by in order to take and furnish the cottage in which they would live together. But it would take every penny of Ralph's savings to purchase this new share in the boat, which really Ruth had begun to look upon almost in the light of a rival.

"The sea takes all! You may say that," she exclaimed

bitterly, as she sat down to her sewing, while Mrs. Morrison cleared away the dinner things from the round table. "It has taken my Ralph. What does he think of me beside it? He is talking now of spending his money—every farthing of it—upon that boat again, and we might have been married this spring; if he'd done as I wished, we might have been married before now," she concluded, in a lower tone.

"It's the right way, dear; you will be the more comfortable by-and-by," said Mrs. Morrison, not noticing Ruth's concluding remark; a third in a boat would have been a poor start for a married man, though there's a many do it. By next New Year, Ruthie, it's your own wedding clothes you'll be stitching at."

Ruth was not at all inclined to wait till next New Year, indeed, she had determined not to do so. This should be the test. If Ralph were really as much in love as he pretended to be, he would be easily persuaded to give up this scheme until after they were married, and between them had saved enough to carry it out. If he was not to be persuaded, that would prove, Ruth thought, that he did not really care for her. It was against her wish that he had come to Hastings at all. Ruth could have cried when she remembered the little cottage in the lane, with the village to the right, and the bare wide marsh lying half a mile to the left—the cottage where she had once hoped to live, and which was now occupied by one of the men who worked under her father. Ruth forgot that she had been quite as much set on having her own way as Ralph had been in having his, and that, after all, perhaps Mrs. Morrison was right in saying, as she often did, that it was for a man to choose his way of life, and for the woman to follow him in it. The more she thought of

it, the more resolved did Ruth grow that Ralph should not have his own way this time, or that he should not have *everything* his own way and Ruth herself into the bargain.

Noticing how silent the girl was, and how moody was her look, Mrs. Morrison fancied Ruth was listening to the roaring of the wind, and the sound, faintly heard up there, of the waves upon the beach, and that her thoughts were in sad unison with the wild accompaniment.

"Don't *I* know how it feels?" the widow said, in the quiet tones that Ruth owned to herself it always did her good to hear, though just now she broke her thread with an impatient jerk, and took up or put down her scissors with a clatter that betokened the irritated state of her feelings—"Don't *I* know how it feels, who saw my brave lads start so many mornings, and watched for their home-coming so many nights, and watched through one long night that never brought them home to me at all, but left me watching still for a sight of them in heaven? Don't *I* know how it feels? But all ain't like that. There's a many happy mothers, and a many husbands and wives as live to grow old together down yonder;" she waved her hand in the direction of the beach below.

"Why should things be so different?" sighed Ruth; "there's Miss Hayward now, she can marry when she likes; her life is easy to her; mine's so hard, and she ain't but a girl like me when all's said and done, though she is a lady and I earn my living. It's unfair."

Mrs. Morrison had one virtue rare in old age, rare in a woman at any age—she seldom lectured.

"You wouldn't have the young lady's life hard too; that would be a poor tale!" was all she said now, and with so cheery a smile that Ruth caught herself smiling

too, and touching with a gentler hand the soft pretty fabric of Pearl's dress.

It was true Ruth had taken a great liking to the young lady, and the liking was mutual. Pearl had a way of interesting herself in "those sort of people," as her friends were accustomed to call girls of Ruth's class, and had soon noticed her as she went backwards and forwards, employed upon little jobs of needlework for the landlady's daughter, a much smarter person than Miss Hayward herself. The little needlewoman and the young lady had had many a talk together, and had grown to be friends before the time came when the press of work on the hands of Pearl made her bethink herself of calling in Ruth's help.

Pearl was always pleased to go and see Ruth at her own home. She had taken quite a fancy to the odd little rooms, one in the window of which the sewing-machine stood, and which opened straight upon the narrow strip of garden, and the other at the back, where she had once had a dress tried on, not without being cautioned against knocking her head on the gas-burner in the middle of the ceiling. The burner hung so low, owing to the ceiling being low too, that hardly any one could stand upright beneath it, certainly no person as tall as Pearl was. Here the window looked out upon a green corner, all ivy and fern leaves—literally a corner only, so closely did the walls of the houses opposite and on either side press upon it. But the luxuriant ivy was a refreshment to the eyes, and but for the broken figure-head of some old ship being artistically propped up in the midst of the quaint bower, it might have been possible to imagine oneself miles away from the sea-side, and in some green inland place. On the small table beneath

the window there was always a pot of musk, filling the tiny apartment with its rich scent. Pearl used to declare later that it was the faint whiff of musk from a plant some one carried through the streets that had conjured up before her eyes Widow Morrison's quiet house, and developed in her brain a scheme for the future. But this is forestalling.

"What a pity to leave this quiet nest for the sailors' quarter!" Pearl said once; to which Ruth answered demurely that the fishermen's cottages were pleasant too, and any one of them could be as quiet as one chose; it all depended upon the people living in them. Ruth was thinking of the home she would make for Ralph, and telling herself that a house of their own would be a great thing even though it was not to be the house she had once set her heart upon.

Pearl knew all about Ralph, and pitied Ruth for losing her heart to one who had thrown up steady employment inland for a wild and dangerous trade. Ruth had naturally given her own view of things, and dearly liked the sympathy of this new friend, who could only see the matter in the light in which Ruth chose to put it, and did not know all the ins and outs, as did Mrs. Morrison and Ruth's father.

The two girls, however, had once been to see the boats go off, and Ralph, colouring up to the eyes, but very proud of the honour, had been introduced to Pearl, who thought him, as indeed most people did think him, a handsome fellow, just fit to stand for the picture of an English seaman. There was something so capable-looking about Ralph Severn, his clear eyes had in them so much intelligence, and his honest outspoken speech inspired such confidence, that from that day Pearl ceased

to pity Ruth, and thought she must have been wrong to try and dissuade her lover from a way of life for which he seemed so exactly fitted, and for which, even Ruth was obliged to confess, he had so good an opening.

"Your Ralph looks like a man who knows his own mind and can judge what he is fit for," Pearl said; "he looks, too, like one who would take good care of a little wife. I think you are giving yourself into very safe keeping, Ruth; I would not vex him, if I were you, by letting him see how much you dislike his business."

Ruth was glad and proud that her lover had made so good an impression, and quite happy for a while, until this talk of delaying the marriage for another year filled her with jealous displeasure, and awoke all the old dislike to his profession that she told herself bitterly had stood first with him throughout, while she herself came second in his estimation. She felt no inclination to confide this new grievance to Miss Hayward, however, for Ruth knew really that it was a prudent arrangement of Ralph's, and one of which her father was sure to approve; in her foolish little heart, she would have preferred that Ralph should be imprudent, and anxious to marry at once. Then, a random speech of one of the girls on the shore rankled in Ruth's mind, and as to that speech pride sealed her lips, so that she did not speak of her lover at all, and when she and Miss Hayward were together, shunned the subject.

The words that had met Ruth's ears as she turned away with the old look, quite as much of anger as of fear, from watching the start of the fishing-boats one rough morning, had been these:

"Goin' to be wed? no, not yet awhile, far's I hear. He ain't in no hurry to be tied to the white-faced thing

afraid of a breath of the sea-wind that brings our livin' to us! I'd not wonder if they never went to church at all, but if handsome Ralph took up with some girl as would think shame to tie a man to her apron-string."

No one would have said such words knowingly in the hearing of Ruth; she had been hidden from sight at the time by the hull of one of the large boats drawn up upon the beach; she went home rejoicing that the time was near now when Ralph and herself *would* go to church together, and prove to the bold girl what a strong attraction "a white-faced thing" had for the handsomest young fisherman in Hastings.

After this it was a shock to Ruth that Ralph should speak of waiting another year.

And then, the manner in which he had spoken! Ruth considered she should have been consulted, and not only have had his intentions announced to her as though there could be no possible doubt that Ralph knew best, and was the one whose right it was to decide upon the future plans of both of them. Ruth knew she had a strong will and a hot temper, and had learned to try and control both. The effort to do so when she was told of Ralph's scheme had kept her so silent that he really did not know how vexed she was, and though he noticed the silence, he fancied that it was owing to the same regret he himself felt at the postponement of their marriage; for he loved Ruth dearly, though it had not occurred to him to sacrifice her future comfort to the wish to marry her at once. Our lads and lasses are accustomed to "keep company" for years sometimes, before they become man and wife. When Ruth said she could not speak of it just then, and that they must talk it over by-and-by, what she *meant* was that nothing should

be decided upon until they had talked it over. Ralph only thought that her heart was as full as his own. She looked so sweet and pretty in his eyes, sitting with her head bent over her work and a crimson spot upon each cheek, that he longed to take her home at once, but since that could not be, only took a more affectionate leave of her than usual, and went away blind to the fact that it was owing to anger and not sorrow that Ruth's cheek was flushed, and her head bent to avoid meeting his eyes.

New Year's Day came, and Ruth had not yet seen Ralph again. As she sat working at Pearl's wedding clothes, it was perhaps only natural that she should indulge some bitter thoughts of the contrast between that which the New Year was bringing to her new friend and to herself. The contrast was all the more striking because they *were* friends; because from being so much with Pearl, Ruth realised how much the two girls had in common—in their youth, their feelings, their tastes even —in spite of the social difference between them. Mrs. Morrison sometimes remarked that it took all sorts of people to make up a world, and that it would be but a queer world if all were of one class; and Ruth used to agree with her. But she could not see much difference between herself and Pearl. They were just two girls, both promised to men they loved, and it seemed hard that Pearl was to be happy while Ruth could have her own way in nothing.

Oddly enough, while the thunder of the waves still went on, though the storm was moderating, the thoughts of Pearl herself were occupied with the same subject, that is, with the contrast between herself and Ruth.

Pearl had seen from the window that the other girl did

not go home at once, but stood watching the storm, while Pearl really wondered how Ruth could keep her feet, and after each wild dash of blinding spray as the waves broke, expected to see her little friend washed away altogether. It was a relief when she moved at last and turned the corner out of sight. "Poor Ruthie! How she does hate the sea," Pearl thought, for her ready sympathy had shown her at once that it was not admiration that held Ruth as though spell-bound during those few minutes; "she is just the girl who, if she were a young lady engaged to a soldier, would make him sell out and be an idle man all his days. I wish I could see her more reconciled to her Ralph's way of life. Certainly men should choose their own calling, and we women never be a weight upon a man doing a man's work in the world. Well, she will be happier soon; the New Year is bringing to us both the best blessing a year can bring. And little Ruth works while she waits. I am as poor as she is—poorer, since not a morsel of the bread I eat is my own, whilst she earns her own living. Why should we be so different, we two girls? I wonder which is the happier,—I wonder which are the happier always, idle girls or working girls. It is too late to try experiments now, or I should have a good mind to do so." And with this Pearl's reflections took another turn —one that, although she was alone, made her smile and colour shyly. The fierce wind, however, and the sea must have mingled in her thoughts still, for when the door of the room opened and a lady entered, Pearl turned towards her with an exclamation that had been on her lips once before that morning.

"Auntie, what do you suppose the New Year is bringing, that it should be ushered in like this?"

"We know what it is bringing to you, dear child," answered the gentle old lady, who had been as a mother to Pearl Hayward for the last three years of her life.

The gas was alight in Ruth's inner room, where she was still at work, and the shutters of the outer one were closed, when Ralph's well-known tap brought her to the door. The storm was over, or nearly over, then. It was too dark to see the heaving of the angry waters as they sullenly subsided, so that only the heavy swell remained to show how fiercely they had raged; but the wind, though it had moderated, blew strongly enough to force the door from Ruth's hand, and send it to with a bang that shook the little house from top to bottom. However, the waves no longer washed over the town; the repairs, both of the sea-wall and the pier, would be put in hand next day, and the nigh wind served now only the good purpose of drying the soaked ground in the lower parts of Hastings and on the Esplanade and Marina. There had not been so very much mischief done after all, Ralph declared, no more than had been done before, and would be done again whenever this high wind and a spring-tide came together. The year had opened well for him and Ruth, at all events, he went on to say, for he had come to tell her that he and his mate were now sole owners of the boat; the money had been paid down that very day.

Ralph seemed quite unprepared for the displeasure with which Ruth received his tidings. High words passed between them, for having once allowed herself to speak, Ruth poured forth all her grievances. She said she had no mind to wait another year for one who cared so little for her as to consult her in nothing; she wondered he considered it worth while to come and tell her what he

had done or resolved upon, since evidently she was nothing to him. It had been the same always, and it had lasted long enough. Better now that Ralph should go his way and she hers, better that they should do so soon than late, for it was plain enough he never meant to marry her at all, and would put her off at the end of this year as he had done before, for of course he would never be content until the boat was his alone; and if it was the boat he wanted, why he had it, and Ruth would go back to her father. It was not to be expected she should wait for a man who showed so plainly that he thought her too foolish to be consulted, and fit only to do his bidding, wait his pleasure, and have her future life mapped out just as he thought proper. That might possibly be a wife's duty, but Ruth was not a wife yet, and never would be to a man who treated her with so little consideration. Let Ralph find some one better suited to him—perhaps he had already done so; some one who would not care whether his boat floated in bottom upwards or not one of these days, so that she would never anger him by looking anxious when he put out to sea; some one who would do his bidding and have no opinion of her own to give even if she were asked for it—which it was not likely would ever be the case if Ralph were her husband. Doubtless he had found such a girl; let him go to her, Ruth repeated.

All the time the words she had overheard on the beach were rankling in her mind. She was thinking what it would be to meet her companions when they knew the marriage was postponed again, and would laugh at her behind her back, and prophesy once more that the marriage never was to take place at all. If only she had told Ralph this, and cried out her resentment on his shoulder.

But she did nothing of the sort, and as he was not a man to submit quietly to such an outbreak of temper even from Ruth, words passed between them that both might find it hard to forgive or forget.

When Ralph went out again into the night, and strode down the steep street towards his lodging in the sailors' quarter, the thought in his mind was that it might be well for him that Ruth had shown her temper now, before it was too late. And when Ruth, standing with the gas-light on her white face and tight-shut lips, heard the door close after her lover, she felt she had said what would never be forgotten, and that she and Ralph were parted for ever.

It did not seem to make much difference to her at first. She was very busy with the work she had undertaken for Miss Hayward, and when she carried home a dress, hardly knew whether to be disappointed or relieved to find the whole house in the confusion of a sudden recall to town, so that the two girls had no opportunity for one of the talks that had always been a pleasure to Ruth hitherto. The rest of the work, when finished, was to be sent to London. This was an inconvenient arrangement for Pearl, but she would not take away from Ruth employment she had once counted on, and talking over the matter and giving the necessary directions occupied the girls so much that there was no time to talk of anything else, except that at parting Pearl said kindly, they would both be married before they met again, for it was an old promise that they *should* meet whenever the Haywards revisited Hastings, and had their niece and her husband to stay with them.

"I shall be sure and find you out in your new home, and see how much braver you are as a fisherman's wife

than the frightened little creature you have been hitherto," said Pearl, and Ruth only coloured without answering.

After that, Ruth sat more closely than ever at her needle. How her thoughts were occupied during those long silent hours, who can say? Now and then, when the wind rose, the girl would lift her eyes from her work and let them rest for a moment on the dark line of tossing waters visible over the housetops, and there would be the old look of dislike upon her face, but she seemed to remember instantly that the waves had no longer power to harm her, for Ralph's safety and welfare were no longer any concern of hers.

She avoided the beach altogether, but from time to time, on her way to and fro with needlework for some of her employers in St. Leonards, or down amongst the shops where silks must be matched and lining and buttons bought, Ralph and she met each other, and passed without word or look of recognition. At such times Ruth held her head high, walked with a firm step, and wore a strange proud smile on her face; and Ralph whistled carelessly as he went by, never turning his head to look after the little figure he used once to declare was the trimmest and neatest in all Hastings. They saw nothing of him at the little house in the hilly street, and heard nothing, for Ruth was too proud to ask, and Mrs. Morrison seldom left home, and knew none of Ralph's people or associates. If Mrs. Morrison had heard of him she would not have dared speak his name to Ruth, who did not brook interference, and kept such unbroken silence herself.

What was she thinking of when the work fell idly on her lap, and she seemed to be listening to the distant

sound of the waves upon the beach? Did she remember the wild storm of that first day of the year, and how a wilder storm still had wrecked her life? Did she ever think of the Voice that could say "Peace, be still," to both alike. Was she regretting the words that had poured forth like angry waters? or when she started now and then and turned her head towards the door, was she listening for a footstep that would never come again?

January with its winter storms passed away, and in the milder air of February a few snowdrops showed in the slip of garden before the door, and the green fern uncurled its fronds amongst the ivy at the back. Ruth had a great deal to do. When it was known that Miss Hayward had trusted her with some of her *trousseau*, orders poured in upon the young seamstress. She would make her fortune before long, Mrs. Morrison declared, half vexed and half satisfied that Ruth appeared quite content to make her fortune for herself alone. But as the spring wore on, and the sea lay quietly glistening in the rays of the sun, and flowers were sold everywhere in the streets, a change came over Ruth. She grew restless, the click of the sewing-machine stopped often, and Mrs. Morrison, looking in from the other room where the window stood open now-a-days, would see Ruth sitting quite idle before her work for half an hour at a time. One day the girl tempted her old friend to take a long walk with her. They went away over the cliff to Fairlight Church. Ruth looked out to sea where all the fishing-boats were coming in, and farther still to where the French cliffs showed so plainly through the clear air. The fresh land breeze blew in her face as she turned it towards the wide level of the marshes, and pointed out Winchelsea and Rye to her companion, who was glad to

rest after her unwonted exertion, and could not get up much enthusiasm about the view.

"It is a most lonesome desolate place, the great marsh; it seems to me that I should miss the sound of the sea, though it has been but a sad lullaby at times," she said.

"You have the sound even there," answered Ruth, "the low booming of the ground-swell far away. I have heard it even on a summer's day. How warm and sweet the spring air feels! The flocks will be moving soon."

It was a day or two after this that Ruth announced she was going home to see her father. "I doubt if I come back here," she said. "Which it would be flying in the face of Providence if you do not," answered Mrs. Morrison, more sharply than it was her wont to speak to Ruth, or to any one at all for that matter. "With a business such as yours has grown to be, how could you do better anywhere else? how could you do as well? And people will not wait for you: it will all fall to pieces in less time than it took you to build it up."

Ruth only repeated that she must go and see her father, and that she doubted whether she should return to Hastings at all.

"There are other men in Hastings as good as Ralph Severn," said Mrs. Morrison; and then she was sorry she had spoken or mentioned Ralph's name, for there was a sudden flush on the pale cheek of Ruth, as though some one had struck her there, and a look of dumb pain in her eyes, that made the widow feel as though she had wantonly hurt some helpless thing.

Ruth was feverishly eager to get away now, but there were one or two orders that in common honesty must be finished first, and it was early April before, with her small bundle in her hand, she took a slow train for part of the

way, and then walked the three miles across the marsh towards Hurstmonceux.

"I shall be glad to see father," she had said at starting, and repeated it often to herself upon the way. And yet, when she reached the village, she turned aside from the direct path to her father's door, and hastened her steps as though the real object of her journey only now lay before her. It was with a strange eagerness that she went up to the low thatched cottage beneath a beech-tree, already clothed in tiniest leaves of living green, and with a trembling hand that she softly raised the latch. How often had she done it before, how often looked in unannounced as now, but never unwelcomed by the patient old woman sure to be seated in the chimney corner, and sure to greet Ruth's coming with a smile! Ruth paused for a moment on the threshold, and looked back at the green lane, and the peep of the marsh beyond. The busy town seemed so far off; all was still and peaceful here; there was a distant sound of bleating, though the flock was hidden by the winding of the road. Everything recalled to the girl her old dreamy happy life. She whispered to herself in a childish way, the childish words, "I will be good," and gave a long deep sigh, in which the weight of cherished anger seemed to fall from her heart. Then, just as the large flock of sheep came in sight, Ruth turned and went into the cottage.

There was an old woman there. A stranger sat by the fire watching the great pot that hung over the flame, and holding an infant in her arms.

"Granny Severn?" this woman exclaimed, in answer to Ruth's faltering questions—"Lor'! she died just after New Year. We've been livin' here ever since, and a mortal lonely place it is to live in. Be you Ruth Davis?

Well, to be sure! Come to visit your father, eh? And how's the world at Hastings? My man was seafaring himself once, but he's crippled in his arms now and good for nought but lookering on the marshes. He can tend a sick sheep or bring back a stray one, when it would be dangerous work for to trust him in a boat, you see. No, no one 'ain't seen nothing of Ralph Severn, not since his granny died and he come home to take her bits of things —not but what he left the most of 'em as they was."

Her voice died away, and there was only the muffled sound of tramping feet and uneasy bleating to fill the silence. Ruth's heart felt like a stone within her. The woman pressed her to stay out of the dust until the sheep should all have gone by, but she declined the offer, and indeed to accept it might have kept her for hours where she was. So Ruth went out into the road and threaded her way amongst the patient creatures. She was quite cut off from Ralph now. Whatever vague hope had led her to his grandmother's cottage had died out. It was all over—over by her own act and deed. The four long years in which they had been all in all to each other were past like a dream. And it had been her own doing.

Of course she had to tell her father. He took it quietly enough. It was a busy season, and he had not much time to spare for Ruth, though he was glad to see her. If she was off with Ralph Severn, she could soon suit herself with some one else, he said, and she doing so well, as by all accounts was the case. By-the-way, madam at the Vicarage had been asking when she was coming home for a holiday; the holiday had no need to be an idle one. There was work wanted at the Vicarage, and plenty to be had elsewhere if Ruth chose to ask for it, and was not above making servant-maids' dresses. She had not been

above it when she went away, but she looked almost the lady now, and as like her mother as two peas; and the shepherd dashed his hand across his eyes, and gave his girl a rough fatherly kiss that did her sore heart good.

Ruth fell naturally into the old ways, the old quiet life. The white-haired Vicar was still sitting amongst his books, and as glad as before to lend them to her. Ruth's taste had changed, he thought; the books she chose now were very serious reading. A volume of Bishop Ken's Sermons was the favourite, for a time at least. The sweet quaint words came home to her heart. She wished to read what would do her good, she said, with such a humble, patient look in her eyes, that her old friends believed she must have learnt some lessons from life since they had seen her last. But it must be confessed the sermons fell oftener from her hand than Tennyson's Poems used to do, and lay unopened beside her when she stole out upon the marsh, where the turf was warm to the foot now, and all manner of flowers blossoming; or perhaps the thoughts suggested by her present reading were more in unison with those born of the lovely scenes around her than even the sweet songs of the poet had been, so that Ruth dropped her book to look up and feel how beautiful all nature was, and to realise the Presence that fills the universe.

She had not so much work to do as at Hastings. Now and then her father spoke to her of going back there; he, too, thought as Mrs. Morrison did, that it was flying in the face of Providence to throw away the business she had got together. At such times Ruth promised to go, with an aching remembrance that Ralph had reasoned much in the same way with regard to his trade as a fisherman, in those days when the two had walked

together in the lanes, and of how she had rebelled against his arguments. Yes, she would go; she would "be good," she said to herself; but lingered on from week to week, though wooed by that strange whiff of sea air blowing across the marshes, till the longing for the crisp dash of the waves themselves became well-nigh pain.

One lovely day in June, when Ruth had not yet quite made up her mind to start, but was thinking of it seriously at last, she set off to carry home a parcel of needlework to the Vicarage, and returning from the little errand saw Pearl Hayward coming along the road towards her. The sight surprised Ruth so much that she stood still. She had been hurt in the winter to receive no friendly letter or message when the work left in her hands was forwarded to London—to receive nothing but the money owing to her—and had fancied that Miss Hayward was, after all, just as thoughtless as most young ladies, and could never have meant half the kind things she said. Since that time Ruth had entertained one or two bitter thoughts of the contrast between herself and her friend, but latterly had ceased to think of her at all, so that her surprise was great to see her in the village, and greater still to hear her say as they met:

"Oh Ruthie! I came to you for help, and you were gone. You must come back with me to Hastings; I came over here to-day to fetch you."

As she spoke Pearl took the passive hand of Ruth, who was too much astonished to utter a word.

"It was dreadful to go to the little house, and to feel so sure of a welcome from you and of your help, and then to find you flown. I felt as though my last prop were broken. But Mrs. Morrison says you ought to come

"As she spoke Pearl took the passive hand of Ruth."

back for your own sake as well as mine, and so I have come to fetch you. Ruth, do you hear?"

"What is the matter? what has happened?" Ruth faltered.

"The waters have gone over my head," exclaimed Pearl, with a little gesture of both hands, as though, indeed, she were in deep waters and saw them closing above her. "You remember how suddenly we were recalled to town last winter—which way were you going, Ruth? let me walk beside you and tell you as we go—it was a summons on business. The bank had stopped payment—the bank in which my uncle was a shareholder and had invested nearly all his money; and what was not there has gone to meet the claims of the creditors. We are quite ruined. It has been such a dreadful time. Everything was sold; we have no money left at all, auntie and I—*no money*, Ruth; do you understand what that means?"

"And Mr. Hayward?" asked Ruth, touching the folds of Pearl's black dress.

"Yes," Pearl answered sadly; "he was spared the worst—my good kind old uncle. He died very suddenly before the worst was known, though they say what he did know hastened his end. Why, if he had died a few weeks later we could not have bought black to wear for him. There is only my aunt and myself now. You will help me, won't you, Ruth, to work for my dear gentle aunt, who has been as good as a mother to me?"

"I will do *anything*, you know I will, anything on earth for you," Ruth cried, finding her voice at last; "but what *can* I do? and when you say work—you are a lady, you know, miss."

Pearl could not help smiling.

"A lady in the sense of an idle person, is that what you

mean?" she began, as the two girls walked side by side in the direction of the marsh; "why, that is like an old man of whom I asked my way here a while ago. He was sitting in the sun at an open cottage door, and he told me he did no more work now, for he had good children who made a gentleman of him. I was puzzled at first. Is it in that way you think of me as a lady, Ruth? I hope to do a great deal of work and yet be a lady still. I thought we could help each other; I should be no hindrance, at all events, for my work is better than yours; you have said so yourself before now."

"Is it—needlework?" Ruth's eyes were wide open; she looked at Miss Hayward curiously, and wondered to herself how she would bear to carry parcels through the streets, and to fit on a dress.

"Of course it is needlework," answered Pearl, not without impatience; "for what else am I fit? I can't teach, but I can stitch; I can't sing or play, but I can cut out; I can't *even* write a book, but I *can* work, and I will work, Ruth! Oh the days in cruel cruel London, when I racked my head and my heart to find plans for the future! There was no opening, you know—nothing to start with. We had *no* money, really none. Auntie took me in when I was an orphan, and now it seemed that I must sit still and see her starve, or beg. We could have begged, of course—any one can do that. One day, while I was puzzling myself with scheme after scheme—I was out in the hot streets at the time—some one passed carrying a flowerpot; there was the rich sweet smell of musk on the air, and it carried me back at once to the little room where you sit sewing in the window. I saw it all quite plainly for a moment—the green ivy in the other window, and good Mrs. Morrison in her widow's

cap. It was like an inspiration, for I knew she would trust me till I could pay for a room, that she would take us in and be kind to auntie, and that you would recommend me to people you worked for. I wrote at once to ask if we could have the little front parlour and the bedroom beyond. And we could; and auntie is there now. But it was a blow to find you gone. I can *do* the work, Ruth, but how can I *get* it unless you come home and help me?"

"I will come," said Ruth; "only—you were married in the spring, miss, surely?"

Ruth's ideas must still have been a little confused, she expressed herself so oddly. The girls were standing at the edge of the marsh land now. There was a quivering light over all, and where the sea should have been visible, a warm white haze hung in the sky. For a moment or two Pearl did not speak, then she turned with a strange smile to Ruth.

"Is it long ago since that wild storm we watched together once?" Pearl said. "I thought it was only six months, but it must be a long long time. I don't want to have secrets from you, dear; he is married to some one else. You see, I never had anything of my own, and now what my uncle would have given me—it was to have been a great deal—is gone. Yes, he is married to some one else: but it does seem, oh! such a long time since New Year's Day."

Ruth's hand sought Pearl's.

"I told you the waters had gone over me," she repeated, with that same gesture.

"It was not your own doing, not your own fault, miss; you have no weight on your heart because of that," said Ruth quickly.

"My poor Ruthie!" Pearl pressed the hand she held. "We will go back together, and help one another to bear it."

Mrs. Morrison had told her new lodger the tale of the lovers' parting, and Pearl sympathised too truly to offer vain consolation. She never made any other allusion to the subject than that one pitiful exclamation. Truly there was a difference in the lot of the two girls now. However bitter might be the cup that Pearl had to drink, it had not been mixed, or held to her lips, by her own hand. It may have been this difference that made her spirits so elastic, while those of Ruth seemed broken.

"We must enter into partnership, you know," Pearl resumed brightly, after a minute or two of silence; "and though you have to find all the capital at first, it will be to your advantage in the end, for I am a better dressmaker than you are; if you were not a very vain girl you would own it at once."

"Oh, I do own it! I never denied it," Ruth said.

They went back to Hastings together, and Pearl's scheme was carried out. In the little upper parlour sat the gentle old lady, from whose lips there had never fallen one word of murmuring over her changed lot, and who appeared as happy to receive all from the hands of her niece as she had once been happy to bestow all with her own hand.

"Never mind me, dear child," she would say, when Pearl cooed over her like a dove, and affected the protecting, even authoritative manner that it is often so touching to see the young put on towards their elders; "where could I be better than here till John and I are together again? and to think I owe this safe refuge to your clever head, and to your warm heart too; for who

but my Pearl would have made *friends*, real friends, of these sort of people? I am sure Mrs. Morrison is a very good woman, and quite a comfort to me; and it is nice for you to have some young thing to speak to, though there is such a difference between you; but Ruth is a sweet girl."

Pearl was supposed to occupy the parlour with her aunt, and to do her work there, but the partnership was a practical matter, and she soon found it convenient to spend more than half her time in the lower rooms, where she and Ruth had the benefit of each other's advice. It was quite true that Pearl was the better dressmaker of the two, and Ruth's employers were not slow to discover the fact. Ruth worked neatly, could fit well, and could copy accurately any pattern entrusted to her. But Pearl was a positive genius, and full of hints and suggestions. Finer and more expensive materials than had ever been seen there before began to make their appearance in the work-room. Ruth was appalled at the irreverent manner in which Pearl handled these stuffs.

"Oh Miss! won't you think a bit longer before you begin to cut?" she exclaimed once, as Pearl measured off the shining folds of such a silk as Ruth had never made up in her life; "it is a dreadful thing to put the scissors into a silk like that."

"Why should it be dreadful?" laughed Pearl, slashing away boldly; "why should it be dreadful when you know exactly what you are going to do and how to do it? Here, sit down to the machine and run the breadths while I plan the body. Don't be afraid of the silk, my little coward; it won't bite."

In those quiet days following the storm, when, as Mrs. Morrison had once said might be the case, the waves of

this troublesome world had washed over Pearl Hayward, her spirits rose, and she was cheerful and content. She no longer asked herself which were the happier, working girls or idle ones, for she believed she knew the answer. Work was certainly the cure for sorrow; she had no time for vain regrets, but was always employed, and happy.

Was work the cure for the sorrow of Ruth also?

Mrs. Morrison believed the girl had forgotten the past. The widow told the story of Ralph in one of those interviews with her lodger in the front parlour—interviews in which, with a tact by no means rare amongst "those sort of people," Mrs. Morrison was careful to stand a pace or two behind the chair of the sweet old lady, with whom, however, she was on the best of terms, and who counted a gossip with her landlady as one of her daily pleasures.

"I did think once Ruth would go off in a decline," the widow said. "Her mother was decliny always," and Ruth takes after her. But she's got over her trouble. I've seen storms in my long life, ma'am, and no doubt you have done the same: them as lives long enough mostly do" (she discreetiy ignored how fierce a storm it was that had driven Mrs. Hayward to this humble haven); "but storms as we raise ourselves are bad to lay, and at one time my mind misgave me that Ruthie had wrecked her own life. But she's got over it—and no wonder! A likely lass, with her living at her fingers' ends, and not one to be a burden only on the man that weds her; it would be a poor tale for her to spend her days fretting over spilt milk, whether it was her hand or another's that overthrew it."

"Surely both were to blame; the young man should have seen her again, if only to give her back her promise and reclaim his own. He hardly behaved honourably."

Mrs. Morrison stared; the words were enigmatical.

"He meant honourable, ma'am, no man more so. A quarrel has put an end to company-keeping often enough before now, and will again, till lads and lasses who like each other well enough at heart have the sense to keep quiet tongues till such time as they're tied up together, so that a sharp word or two can't part them. Ruth might have let out at Ralph after they were wed, and no harm done."

It was Mrs. Hayward's turn to stare. She often found it difficult to understand Pearl's friends, and now this new view of wifely duty was sadly puzzling, all the more that it was propounded by lips from which the gentle wisdom of old age was apt to fall. Mrs. Morrison so frequently gave utterance to pious and tender thoughts, that her lodger found it hard to reconcile with such this oddly worldly-wise sentiment of for bearing to quarrel with a man till you could no longer injure your own prospects by so doing.

The summer passed away, and autumn brought once more the usual crowd of visitors to St. Leonard's. Friends who had known the Haywards in better days came there amongst others, and this was an opportunity for which Pearl had waited. She took a mischievous pleasure in applying to them for employment, and in noticing how shy they were of her afterwards, appearing absolutely frightened if they chanced to meet her. It was real fright, arising from awkwardness and from not knowing what was expected of them. The world is neither so cold-hearted nor so *worldly* as people like to imagine it, but unaccustomed situations alarm timid minds as strange surroundings alarm children. If Pearl had been a governess, a music-mistress, they would have

known how to treat her. There were precedents for those sort of things; there was none at all for a young lady turned dressmaker, and who was not in the least afraid of it herself, but talked openly of her "bill" and her "charges." It was quite as much because it was supposed that Pearl herself would be mortified and covered with confusion to be stopped and greeted as she passed to and from her work at some fashionable house, that chance acquaintances meeting her looked the other way and felt universally miserable until she had gone by. Some few real friends there were, however, wise enough to be glad to let the girl's clever fingers work for them by day, and equally glad to have the pleasure of her company now and then of an evening. And some who would call for Mrs. Hayward and take her long drives, or bring her flowers and fruit and cheer her with visits—attentions for which Pearl's grateful thanks were given warmly. Not even the sight of the sewing machine, or of Ruth's pale face bending over it, alarmed these few sensible people.

It was an odd experience to Ruth, when Pearl would come home of a morning from fitting on a dress to a young lady in the same house which Pearl herself had occupied a few months before, and ask Ruth to help her dress that evening to go there as a guest. Pearl could not but laugh at Ruth's astonishment and innocent delight at it all.

With regard to Ruth herself, Pearl was more clear sighted than Mrs. Morrison. There was a wistful pathetic look on the young face. When autumn winds blew and the autumnal equinox raged, Ruth avoided the sight of the sea, and sat in the back room whenever that was possible. Though not restless and irritable as she

had been in the spring, she was so sad and subdued that the heart of Pearl ached for her little friend. Returning one day from an intricate bit of shopping that it had taken the wisdom of both heads to bring to a satisfactory conclusion, the girls met Ralph with one or two other young men and a couple of stalwart Hastings lasses. The party were noisy and merry. Ralph did not see Ruth; had he done so they would still have passed each other without a greeting; Ruth knew that, and yet her cheek paled visibly. In the evening she let her work fall so often that Pearl knew her thoughts were astray. Was she wondering whether a new name—not hers—were painted on the old boat yet—wondering which of those loud-voiced girls was the one whom Ralph had found better suited to him than herself—the one whom Ruth herself had bid him seek?

It was shortly after this that the two girls were coming home together one evening when a gathering storm was presaged by heavy banks of clouds upon the horizon and fitful gusts of wind. The Esplanade was thronged by fashionably-dressed people, most of them intent only upon their own concerns or the usual idle gossip of the place; but here and there knots of two or three persons standing together and looking seaward appeared to have their attention attracted by something or other out of the common.

"I wonder what they are looking at," Pearl observed, as the girls passed one such group, and she became aware of still more people all gazing at the sea, and of several gentlemen with opera-glasses or telescopes held to their eyes; "I can see nothing."

"I am afraid that is it," answered Ruth nervously, and then some one near said:

"The boats are not in and a storm is rising."

Pearl saw Ruth flush, and when they reached the turning they should have taken, and which would have led them away from the sea and beach, she hesitated.

"Let us go down to the shore," suggested Pearl. She had suggested it often before, but had never yet succeeded in persuading Ruth to take her there. This evening Ruth followed with only a silent gesture of assent.

The wind was rising fast. Rough weather had prevailed for many days, then had come a lull, and at earliest dawn that morning the boats had put out to sea.

The men had been right enough in that, but they should have been home before now. The sky had held warnings enough since afternoon. There was a little crowd upon the beach. A weather-beaten sailor, sweeping the horizon with the glass he carried, was defending the absent men; they were foolhardy, some of the bystanders declared.

"There's none to blame," answered the old sailor, speaking with low emphasis, and still holding the glass to his eye. "It's just a Providence. But for my seafaring days being over, I should have been out myself. They are in the way of duty, and when that is so, it is easy to bear whatever comes of it. Where there's no blame, trouble falls light."

Ruth moved impatiently; the words hurt her. She stood looking out at the sea, where not a sail was visible, and where, far off, white foam-flecks on the water showed how the wind was rising more and more, while the clouds came on towards the shore so that the evening darkened before its time.

"If my man don't come home there will be seven fatherless children to find food for," exclaimed one of the women, of whom two or three had stolen out to watch.

"It's just a Providence," the old sailor repeated.

"The sea takes all," said the woman bitterly.

Ruth wrung her hands. No one heeded her; all were too much occupied by the common fear. Did Ruth feel that the sea would indeed take *her* all, for that she and Ralph, parted in time, would never be one again in eternity? Did she feel how, on the contrary, had they still been friends, the sea could not take all—could in fact take nothing, for not death itself could have divided them.

As the wind rose to a gale, and angry rain dashed down, and the group of watchers on the shore grew more and more disheartened, so that none but prophecies of evil were heard, Pearl persuaded Ruth to come home. They found Mrs. Morrison as anxious as themselves. It reminded her, she said, of one year when out of all the Hastings boats four only had returned. That was long ago, before Ruth was born, but it had happened in much the same way, that is, under much the same circumstances as now, after a long spell of slack trade owing to bad weather, when the men had naturally been anxious to keep long out, and had perhaps been careless of warnings from the overcast heavens. Such talk did not raise the spirits of Ruth, and when Mrs. Morrison, remarking her pale cheeks, observed that, after all, things had turned out for the best, for certainly Ruth was not fit for a fisherman's wife, since even when it was no concern of hers she was so upset by the thought of danger, the girl could no longer bear it, but crept away to bed.

All night long the gale continued. Pearl lay awake

listening to the wind, or, when she dozed, woke frightened from dreams of sinking vessels, until towards dawn she fell heavily asleep, to be roused by the unmistakable sound of the opening and closing of the house door. She rose at once, and found that Ruth had gone to the shore. Anxious and sad, Pearl followed. The sea was running high, but the storm was over, and in the dull gray light the boats one by one coming in. The morning air struck chill, and rain fell softly. Pearl saw Ruth at last, among the fisher-folk crowding the beach. She was walking restlessly up and down a narrow strip of sand; her face was white and set. The old sailor with his glass was there still; Pearl thought he must have stood there all night long. Though the boats were coming in, he was looking out to sea.

"There's one missing," he said, when Pearl drew near and spoke to him, "but one—and after such a night as this."

"Which is it?"

Pearl had hardly any need to ask, for why was Ruth there watching still?

"Severn's boat ain't in yet—he's not a married man."

"A bold sailor—one of the best, is he not?" Pearl felt that Ruth was listening with every nerve of her body.

"Ay, he is that—or was; Severn ain't the man he used to be."

"Has he not been doing well?"

"He makes money, but it goes as it comes now-a-days. He's a sight too often at The Fisherman's Home for money to stay by him. Some say he weren't sober when they started at yesterday's dawn: but it's been a night to sober any man. And only one boat missing—only one.

I did hear as something come between Severn's lass and him, by reason of which he ain't the man he was."

The glass was at the old man's eye as he repeated half absently: "Something come between his lass and him." Then with a sudden chnnge of manner, and shutting up the telescope with a jerk that made Pearl start, he turned to her quite fiercely: "Women! that's where 'tis; women at the bottom of all the mischief ever I heard of. If they was at the bottom of the sea, too, along with the herring, it's not I as would throw the net over the side for to draw 'em out. Women! I 'ain't never had no opinion of 'em!"

He walked away, leaving Pearl with a half-hysterical laughter possessing her that died on her lips as she saw the face of Ruth. Her eyes stared out to sea, and her lips were moving fast; she was repeating over and over the homely words of the old sailor: "Something come between his lass and him; he's not the man he was; something come between his lass and him."

Pearl came up to her and threw an arm round her, for she could scarcely stand. The light was growing stronger. There was a joyful stir all round them. Little children ran to clasp their father's knees; wives, according to their different impulses or the different views they entertained of wifely duty, sobbed for joy, hurried home to prepare a meal, or scolded and rated the men for not having come before. The men themselves looked grave, and spoke in low tones of the missing boat. But after all, for one only to be missing! and what a take of fish they had! Still one and another stood watching before they turned off home. Ruth never moved. Pearl could not bear to speak to her, or to urge her to come away, although the spot was growing

gradually deserted now; only one or two people remained; a little child was sitting singing to itself on the beach higher up; the tide was coming in, the spray dashed over the girls where they stood. Pearl was aware at last of a slight stir amongst the few persons near, and of a joyful shout; but the gaze of Ruth was turned the other way.

"You are looking the wrong way, Ruthie!" Pearl cried, with her voice full of a strange sweet music; "turn dear! see how good God is to you."

There was the fresh rush and dash of a boat's prow through the waves, and the first sight Ralph beheld as his vessel was beached and he leaped into the shallow water, was the two girls standing there together, the arm of Pearl still supporting Ruth.

One look at the wan face of Ruth and her eager eyes was enough. It needed not the tremulous movement she made towards him, it needed not her outstretched hand, or any word to say what had brought her there. Ralph came up to her at once, and took her hand in his.

"It has been a rough night, Ruthie," he said; "but the day makes up for all."

Pearl withdrew her arm; she thought Ruth could stand alone now. Drenched with spray, wet with the soft rain, Pearl went away smiling to herself. She was not wanted any more, and it was hours before Ruth came in to breakfast.

Thus it came about that Ruth married after all, and lives now in the little house in the sailors' quarter. But when Ralph proposed putting up the banns forthwith, it was Ruth who said :

" 'It has been a rough night, Ruthie, but the day makes up for all.'"

"Nay, we will wait till next spring—longer, if you think it prudent to wait till the boat is all your own."

Ralph, however, would not hear of the longer delay, and the following spring saw them man and wife. Before that day came Ruth had spoken words she once thought she could never bring herself to speak.

"Forgive me," she began.

Ralph met her half-way directly: "Forgive me, Ruthie; I had no business to take you at your word. We were both wrong. Why, lassie, never fret over it! You will let on at me many a time from the chimney-corner yet."

Ruth, however, maintains that they have had their first and last quarrel. She means it; but it is early days with them yet, and though the little wife is so sweet and quiet-looking, Ralph will be a rash man if he allow his steps to turn too often in the direction of The Fisherman's Home. He has small temptation to do so while his own home is so bright. They are a happy couple.

Pearl, still at work in the small house on the hill, is happy also. She and her aunt are everything to each other, but friends have gathered about them, and amongst those who admire Pearl's skill and her courageous independence, rumour whispers there is one who threatens to make her forget the false friend who left her stranded when the tide of fortune turned. However this may be, the face of Pearl is sunshiny and her step light. She is very busy, and with a pretty affectation, pretends to be busier than she is. Now and then she will snatch a holiday, leave her work, and run down to see how it fares with Ruth in her new home, or wait with her on the beach to watch the boats come in.

"You do not fear the sea any more?" Pearl says, as

the girls stand there together, and she notices with what a different expression Ruth regards her old enemy.

"No, miss; it can do me no harm, you know," is the quiet answer.

Ruth does not explain, but her friend understands. "And the waters that seemed to close over my head took from me nothing that was worth keeping," she says, after a pause. "God guided the storm for us both."

"There was a great difference between us, for you never had yourself to blame, miss. You said just now I did not fear the sea; I think the night I feared it most taught me that no storms outside our own hearts can harm us really—nothing can really part Ralph and me, not even——"

Ruth leaves her speech unfinished and stands looking at the water, smooth enough to-day, and bright in the sunshine. There is hardly wind to fill the lumbering sails that it has taken so much hauling and so much shouting to get into place. The boats are close in-shore still, and the voices of the men come clearly across the water as the girls turn away at last.

Whether the sea will ever wash over the marsh lands again, right up to Winchelsea, who can say? But this much is certain: the waves of this troublesome world are in the same Fatherly Hand that rules the tempests themselves, and to storms either within or without our own hearts, there is a Voice that can say, "Peace, be still."

A TWELVEMONTH'S GOOD CHARACTER.

IT was harvest-time. Under the September sun the corn fell fast before the reapers. Women as well as men were at work in the large field, for time pressed; hop-picking treads fast on the heels of harvest-work in Sussex; the men had volunteered to make but one job of cutting and clearing this crop, already over-ripe, and the willing help of the women, many of whom are accustomed to all kinds of field-work, was not to be despised. The golden grain fell the faster before the sickle of Gad's wife because of the glance she gave now and again to the children at play under the hedge.

There were so many of them!

"I wonder you find time for field-work, that I do, Mis' Gad, with all them little ones to see to at home," observed Mrs. Bunce, with a complacent look towards her Mary Ann, standing amongst the corn nearly as high as herself. Mrs. Bunce was, so to say, a hen with one chick, and if

the neighbours considered, as they undoubtedly did, large families were matters for condolence, they yet rather looked down upon small ones, so that Mrs. Gad, having come to the end of her row, and raising herself to her full height in order to rest her aching back, answered somewhat shortly:

"The Lord sent 'em, Mis' Bunce, and for every mouth He sends a mouthful; there ain't one too many on 'em."

"It appears to me as there be seven too many," laughed Mrs. Bunce, stooping again to her sickle, and with another satisfied glance at Mary Ann.

"We don't see it so, Gad and me. 'Tain't likely as a large family would be named as a blessing in the Scriptures if it weren't a blessing." With which argument, an unanswerable one in her estimation, the worthy woman fell to work again with renewed vigour: whether she realised the fact or not, every one of those little arms under the hedgerow adding strength to her arm.

Whether the Gads' large family was a trial or a blessing, who was to decide? Up at the Hall, where Mary before her marriage had lived as under-housemaid, there were quite as many boys and girls as in the cottage opposite the harvest field. The whole village took a pride in the Squire's children, and liked to see them at church—the young gentlemen home from school, the young ladies, the little girls with their governess, and the nursery party who were taken out before the sermon, and occasionally made audible remarks during the prayers. Not even Mrs. Bunce considered there were seven too many, or one too many of them, for there was enough for all. Gad himself always maintained there must be something wrong somewhere if it did not turn out in the long run that each pair of hands could earn "enough" for

each mouth in the world. He brought up his family in this belief, and yet, if fairy godmothers still visit children at their birth, and brought gifts of fortune to each child at the Hall, they placed two gifts only in each little cradle at the cottage—love and care. Whether these neutralised one another, the care quenching love, or the love so sweetening care that it was hardly recognised, might have been a moot point; Mrs. Gad might have said one thing and her neighbours another.

If in sermon time the thoughts of the Squire's wife wandered now and then to the future of her boys, and she pondered over commissions in the army, or Church livings in the gifts of rich relations, Mary might be forgiven for catching herself wishing that Joe were ready for the ploughboy's place which was, so to say, going begging on the farm that year, or for calculating how much the younger lads could make at stone-picking if she only had the luck to get them taken on. When the Squire walked through the village, his future Lord Chancellor and General of Division, rosy and careless, running on ahead, and passed Gad amongst his boys, matters were tolerably equal between the two men, although Gad had no other ambition than to see his lads honest labourers such as himself. Still, in bad times, there were anxious moments for Mary and her husband, nor at the best of times is fourteen shillings a week a large sum with which to provide food for ten mouths, to say nothing of clothing or of shoe-leather, that expensive item in the domestic budget of an agricultural labourer blessed—or tried, which was it?—with a large family.

Mary could not but smile to herself sometimes at the good advice given to her by her old mistress at the Hall.

"You have a good deal more than your husband's bare wages, you know; there are your own earnings, and surely even the children bring in something," Mrs. Danvers would say, "and then there's the hop-picking. You should have no debt at the shop, and should even be able to lay by something. It is a great thing to pay ready money for everything and much cheaper in the end."

"Indeed it is, ma'am," Mary would answer with a curtsey, as she looked round the pretty morning room so familiar to her once, and at the placid lady seated before her, and, although perhaps she could not have expressed herself, felt in what a different aspect the life of a working-woman must present itself to Mrs. Danvers and to the working-woman herself.

It was true the children brought in something. The little lass at the National School earned sixpence by nursing a neighbour's child on Saturday, the eldest girl had had a little place already, the boys all helped in one way and another. But as for the hop-picking, and Mary's own earnings, they paid the shoe bill for the whole family, besides clearing off once annually the credit account at the shop. Mary thought she would just like to see Mrs. Danvers trying to do without that account, and paying ready money for everything, when there was the rent to lay by, half-a-crown a month for her husband's benefit club, and food to pay for every week, or the account at the shop would mount up to more than the luckiest of hop-pickings could wipe off, although to be sure before it mounted as high as that credit would be stopped altogether.

Still Mary did not complain. They had enough, and, as Gad said, what could you want more than enough?

But she worked hard, with who knows what sweet hopes of being worked for in her turn when the children should be old enough? She might have been seen returning home along the lanes, at almost any season of the year, a train of little ones behind her, and baby—there always *was* a baby—enthroned in the rickety old perambulator. In spring they would be coming home thus from the first tying of the young hop plants to the poles, the work which of all others is most disliked by our women, obliging them as it does to stoop for hours together or kneel upon the damp soil, the dark earthstains from which mark all their garments at that season. At times when there is nothing else to do, you will meet Mary with a huge bundle of shavings balanced on her head, baby half-smothered with more shavings in his little chaise, and the children strewing the ground or festooning the hedges with the loads they carry, and infinitely surprised when home is reached to find the loads have become so small. The party have been up in the woods where the new hop-poles are sharpened before having the ends dipped in tar, and the shavings are the perquisites of the women, who, wearing stout aprons with pieces of leather in front of them, do quite as much of this work as the men do; they are glad enough of the shavings to use as kindling through the long winter, when fuel is dear. Or, as now, Mary will be heated and sunburnt from harvest work, while the children are at play, under the hedgerow. But when gleaning begins, how useful will be the little fingers! Or when the acorns drop fast from the oak trees in the lanes, and may be had for the trouble of picking them up, how many halfpence the boys and girls bring home proudly. Almost any one who keeps a pig will give a halfpenny for a bushel of acorns, to say nothing of Gad's

own pig, for which the supply is always welcome. In short, Mary is never idle, and trains her little ones to habits as industrious as her own.

There are amongst us many such mothers of large families. The farmers' wives say the best little servants come from such homes, where the very fact of there being so many to provide for makes it a matter of necessity that none should be idle. Lyddy, the Gads' eldest girl, might almost have had her choice of the "little places" round. But Lydia wished to see the world.

Is this an unnatural wish at sixteen, when it has dawned upon one, partly from odds and ends of gossip picked up here and there, but partly, too, from the schooling to which one was always bidden to attend, that the world is a large place and well worth seeing? The door stands so temptingly open! The lads at least must work hard and make their own way, but for the lasses there is always service. No responsibility, no need of money in your pocket. A tidy suit of clothes, a tolerably good character from your last place, and there is nothing to prevent you "having a little change" at any time. It must be owned it is a strong temptation to a young girl.

The days are gone when servants were not only content, but all the better pleased, if situations could be obtained near to their own homes, so that father and mother might look for a visit from their girl on her Sunday out. In those days too, after Jane or Betsy had duly served an apprenticeship as maid-of-all-work at the shop, been promoted to a farm-house, and from thence to the service of some of the resident gentry of the neighbourhood, the parents could go up to the house and ask leave to speak to her at any time when there was family news of interest to impart. Such had been Mary's

own service; but Lydia had just thrown up her first place, and was on the look-out for another.

This scheme of Lydia's was costing her mother some anxious thoughts on the warm September evening, as the golden grain fell before the reapers. The binders were already at work in half the field. There would be a moon, but Gad declared if there were none the men would carry the field by starlight rather than disappoint the master; he would not forget it to them, they all knew that. While Gad spoke the sun was beginning to slant so that its rays fell full in the eyes of the reapers as they bent to their work. The great waggon turned in at the gate, and loading began at that end of the field just as Lydia came along by the hedge with baby in her arms, and said that supper was ready at home.

The girl had heard of a place, and was very much excited, and eager for her mother's sympathy. But Mary found it hard to sympathise. The place was in London, and it was through a former schoolmate of Lydia's that she had heard of it.

"I don't think much of Jane Lowe's recommendation, and father won't think more of it than I do," said Mary, looking more anxious than ever.

"It's a very nice lady as Jane lives with," answered Lydia, pouting and colouring under her shady sun-bonnet. Joel Hunt had paused in his work, and was listening to the talk between mother and daughter. The young fellow had come to the end of his row, and had gathered a great blue cornflower and a scarlet poppy; he was waiting with a smile to give them to Lydia when he should catch her eye; Lydia would not look towards him.

"It is a friend of Jane's mistress as wants a girl," she went on; "the lady would pay my expenses up—'tain't

but seven and nine-pence third-class return—and pay me home again if I wasn't likely to suit. I've got a good stock of clothes, and they'll give me a character at Bunt's."

Mary did not speak for a moment. She stood looking at the child in her neat cotton dress and pink sun-bonnet. Perhaps Mary was remembering how her mother had gone with her when she went to her first place, and how she herself had stood humbly by, hardly venturing to answer yes or no when directly addressed, and dropping a curtsey at every monosyllable, while it was her mother who made all the agreement for her. And now, here was this young thing speaking of going off alone to London to see a strange lady and speak up for herself; and well able to do it too. Times were changed indeed!

"Well, mother?" cried Lydia impatiently, a smile dimpling her cheek as she spoke, though she hid her face directly on baby's soft fat neck. The smile was not for Mary, but for Joel, who was laughing outright to see that Lydia *would* not look at him.

"A six months' character would not have been worth much when I was young," said Mary.

"Oh, one can't stop in them little places for ever! People understand as you only go to your first place to get your hand in; ladies don't look for long characters from first places. Why, they'll give me twelve pounds a year in London." Lydia tossed her head and looked point blank at Joel now as she mentioned this illimitable sum. He held out his flowers to her at once.

"You won't get such a posy in London," Joel said, and somehow or other found himself walking side by side with Lydia towards the road, for the men were, most of them, going home for a bit of supper, and would come back

fresh as ever to finish off their task by moonlight. Those who were not going home were already seated under the hedge, where the contents of great cans of cold tea and stone bottles of beer were being dispensed by the farm-servants.

Lydia's father declared that he wished a return ticket to London were seven pounds nine, instead of seven and ninepence. People would think twice then of paying a girl's expenses up and down, and the girls themselves would think twice before going so far from home.

"I don't hold with cheap travelling," he said; "it have done a deal of mischief, unsettling folks' minds, and scattering families as was born and brought up together. There wasn't no seven-and-ninepenny returns when mother was young, and went to service in her own neighbourhood, where a young fellow had a chance to see her now and again, and to get to know her like before he kept company for good and all. What was good enough for mother might serve your turn, Lyddy, for you ain't nothing to look at compared to what mother was as a lass."

Mary said, "Have done now;" and smiled at the little compliment, as she gave her husband his beer, and Lydia laughed.

"Folks went to London in those days too," the girl said.

"Ah, but they went serious, went to stay, to go into business or settle down in a long service, not as they go now, just when the fit takes 'em, and turning up again like a bad shilling when one looks least for 'em."

However, no one was going to interfere with Lydia. It was only just, her parents considered, that if she could earn her own living she should go her own way. The conditions of life were altered since their own young

days. It would not have been possible then to start off for London, with the certainty of being able to come back again as easily as one might have done from the nearest market town if anything went wrong; it was possible now, and no one was going to prevent Lydia pleasing herself.

The rough sense of justice that left the girl thus at liberty was a riddle to Mrs. Danvers. She scolded Mary roundly. Lydia ought to be kept at home and under her mother's own eye for years to come, Mrs. Danvers said, influenced perhaps by the fact that an under-housemaid was just then wanted at the Hall, and that the very rooms and passages her mother had scrubbed and dusted long ago were waiting for Lydia now, if she chose to undertake the care of them.

"I should have thought you would have preferred it for her, Mary. Not only would you keep her near you, but it seems to me such a fitting thing that your daughter should be heiress of her mother's broom in our service."

Mary did not quite know what her old mistress meant, but it was nothing new to her to be puzzled by that lady's expressions, and she had lived in service long enough to know how to answer almost anything without showing she was puzzled. She said now, that of course she would prefer Lydia's living at the Hall, and was most grateful for the offer, but that the girl was bent upon having her own way and seeing the world, and that being the case would never settle down or give satisfaction in the quiet place offered her.

"*You* were content with your native village all your life," said Mrs. Danvers.

"Times is changed," answered Mary. "You see, ma'am, Lyddy does for herself now, so it is but fair to let

her choose for herself;" which was exactly what Mrs. Danvers objected to.

"I should never let a girl of mine choose for herself at sixteen. That is where you are so wrong."

Poor Mary sighed; she despaired of making the lady understand the different footing on which a mother and daughter stood where the daughter earned her own living, and was so far independent, and where the daughter was a young lady in the schoolroom still, without the power of being independent even should she have the wish. If Lydia were coerced now, a sense of injustice would rankle in her mind, and she would come to no good. Therefore, Lydia should not be coerced, though Mary sadly regretted this offer from Mrs. Danvers had not been heard of before Jane Lowe's letter came. If she had heard of nothing else, Lydia might have been proud and glad to go to the Hall; but now, ten pounds a year under a strict housekeeper, in the old neighbourhood, where every face was as familiar to her as the very lanes and fields themselves, would not bear comparison with twelve pounds, and the liberty of Sunday out, in a great city where all would be new.

The conversation with Mrs. Danvers took place in the moon-lit harvest-field. It was so pretty a sight that the party from the Hall had been tempted to stroll down and look on. A great yellow harvest moon lit up the scene; the men worked with a will, the corn was all down, and the binders were hurrying to get the sheaves in readiness for the waggon, as the field was being rapidly cleared. Joel and Lydia worked side by side. Lyddy wore the blue cornflower and the poppy in her hat, for the sun-bonnet had been left at home.

Joel thought he rather preferred the hat; it was easier

to see the pretty face under it. Mary could not help sighing again when she looked towards the pair. Just so had she and her Richard grown up together; and then when she was living up at the Hall, how they used to walk together on Sundays; how pleasantly the long courtship, lasting for years, had passed for both of them! And if life had been hard at times since they married, they had struggled together; and what more could any woman want than a good husband, a good friend or two to look to in her native parish, and a houseful of healthy children, every one of whom stood between the old age of mother and father and that dismal workhouse the prospect of which hangs like a nightmare over the days of the honest poor? It is not the parents of large families of good and loving children who need fear to end their days in the workhouse.

Why could not Lydia be content? Girls never were content now. They went away to Hastings, Tunbridge, Brighton, London—anywhere and everywhere—coming and going from cottage homes, so that the village itself was not so quiet as Mary remembered it of old, but had in it a breath from the outer world with all its stir and tumult.

"Times is changed," said Mary, twisting the long straw band with which her sheaf was to be bound; Gad held the other end of the band; they stood just as they had stood together in those far-off courting days, and many a time since; to-night every one turned to the job that lay at hand; there was no regular order in the work, only every effort to fulfil the promise of the men that the whole crop should be cut and carried between dawn and dark.

"Ay, that's where 'tis; times be changed," echoed Gad

thoughtfully. They were both too wise to dream of stemming the tide of time. Lydia must go her own way, as other lasses did now-a-days, not without many a word of advice and warning, but without coercion.

A coquettish "What's the odds to you where 'tis I live?" followed by a sudden half-smothered exclamation of "Behave now, Joel!" as the two happened to pass for a moment into the deep shadow of the one ash-tree standing in the middle of the field, might have suggested that Joel was not taking the matter with quite so much philosophy. But it would not be fair to listen to what Joel was saying to Lydia under the moonlight.

By-and-by the last waggon-load turned out of the field. The men cheered as it passed through the gate and came out on to the road lying full in the moonlight. The farmer said a few words of hearty thanks for willing service rendered, thanks not the less hearty because the service would be well paid for in the end. The party from the Hall strolled away along the lane, where the moonlight could not dispel the blank darkness here and there. Farmer Doulish went with them a little way, and discussed the rate of wages with the Squire; when the farmer strode back again half-an-hour later, and crossed the bare field to which the solitary ash-tree gave its name, and which had so lately been the scene of such animated labour—"a truly pastoral scene," Mrs. Danvers had called it—the whole village was asleep.

Lydia had her way, and went to London by the early parliamentary train one morning, when the dew had not yet been dried by the sun, and when the village was only just waking to its daily life. Joel carried the little paper-covered trunk to the station, although the girl's father was with her, and put her into the train himself. If her

heart failed her at the last she did not say so, but laughed as she kissed her hand from the window of the compartment. And after all, why should her heart fail her? She was doing no more than Jane Lowe and many another girl had done before her, and it would be easy enough to come home if she did not like her place. Anything would be better, Lydia thought, than staying on in the village, and feeling countrified when other lasses came and went from the great city, and showed their smart gowns and gay ribbons. Lydia would have smart gowns to show when she came home again, and meantime a little change would be pleasant.

Certainly she secured the change—there was no doubt about that, when once in London, where everything was so new and so unlike what she had imagined. How gay and animated were the thronged streets! The time had not come for their utter loneliness to weigh upon the country child accustomed to know every face she saw, and to have a kind greeting from every one she met. Her place proved to be a quiet one, or would have seemed so to a London girl, who, unless she came from the immediate neighbourhood, and was therefore familiar with the spot, might have wondered at it more than Lydia did. To her, where everything was strange, the old school, and alms-houses, founded by a pious lady more than a century ago, were no stranger than the rest.

After the bewildering drive through the streets from the station, the quiet green enclosure, with the narrow doors of the alms-houses ranged down two sides of it, seemed a home-like place. The school-house, with its chapel, and the private house of the schoolmaster and chaplain, whose wife Lydia had come to see, filled up one end of the court opposite to the high wall, shutting

all in from the street. Having left the cab at the iron gate in this wall, and walking up the flagged path to the low door with the chaplain's name on a brass plate, Lydia found the roar of the streets was but faintly heard. A tree or two standing on the broad square of closely-shaven turf threw pleasant shadows on the grass; one side of the court was in a blaze of sunshine, the other in deep cool shade from the walls. Before one of the doors a kitten was at play, from another an old face looked out at Lydia as she passed shyly up the path. Her first modest ring at the bell was unheard, and she stood for a little while looking round her at the peaceful scene. An evergreen shrub planted in a large pot ornamented the doorstep of the alms-house nearest to her; the owner of the flowerpot had filled up all the vacant space round the shrub with mustard and cress. She came out now, and bent her old back stiffly to cut some of her salad, which after a moment she carried in with her, pausing to stare at Lydia before she went.

"Mother couldn't wish for nothing quieter nor more respectable," thought the girl; and then her eyes brightened, for they fell upon the iron gate, before which the cab was still standing—the driver making impatient signs to her to ring again—and the gate opened upon the busy noisy streets, so full of life, and stir, and movement—opened full upon the world Lydia had come to see.

Her new mistress was pleased with this little country maid in her neat dress; the trunk might be brought in forthwith, it would not be worth while for Lydia to go back again while her character was written for; she might remain where she was on trial. The colour came and went in her cheeks, and she answered so modestly, dropping a curtsey now and then as she spoke, that Mrs.

Franks, contrasting the demeanour of this girl with that of the dozen or so who had, after the present fashion of servant-maids, come to hire her instead of she them, believed she had found a treasure at last. Like most ladies seeking domestic servants, Mrs. Franks had had her patience sorely tried of late by applications from incapable, not to say free-and-easy, damsels, who questioned her at their leisure, and asked wages suitable only for those who knew their business thoroughly, whereas every one of these lasses would need training more or less. It was not the wages, however, that Mrs. Franks objected to, for even Lydia expected double what a young girl of her age would have looked for ten years ago; Mrs. Franks, like Mary Gad, recognised that "times were changed," but, at all events, if now-a-days good service was not obtainable even for twelve pounds a year, she would at least try to secure good manners and a respectable appearance for her money. This modest little Lydia would suit her well.

Modest as she was, Lydia spoke up for herself; she stipulated for her Sunday out once a month, and her fortnight's holiday in summer, though the stipulation was made in the meekest of voices.

"Don't you be put upon," Jane Lowe had said, and when the interview was over Lydia did not think she had been put upon at all. All the time Mrs. Franks was speaking to the girl of her duties, of the cleanliness, neatness, obedience that would be expected of her, Lydia was wondering whether Jane Lowe lived near enough for them to see each other often, near enough for Lydia to slip in handy when there was nothing particular to do, as she used to slip in to visit a friend of hers who lived a few doors from the butcher's shop which had been Lydia's

first place, wondering whether London would prove as delightful on nearer acquaintance as it did at first sight, and whether leisure would be allowed her to see its sights and spend her money upon the wonderful bargains in the shop windows that had caught her eye as she came along.

She fully meant to be a good servant—that is, she meant to fulfil her half of the contract, and keep the rooms clean and do the work she was paid for. The old-fashioned idea with which her mother had started in life, the idea of dutiful obedience on one side, and of protection as well as authority on the other, between mistress and maid, belonged to by-gone days. Times are changed; the relations of employer and employed stand in the place now of all that used to be implied by the words master and servant. Whether the change is for the better or not there is no need to decide here. Certainly there are now-a-days plenty of good conscientious little girls doing their work faithfully, who would be surprised at the exercise of any kind of authority over them in anything that did not relate to their work and to that alone. They may not be the worse for this; the truth probably is that they are neither better nor worse than their predecessors of twenty years ago. As for mistresses, the best may possibly be those who, as St. Paul says, "rule with diligence," exacting rigorously the due performance of the contract between themselves and their handmaidens, the work to be done for the wages paid, and for any thing else depend less upon authority than influence—the influence of the elder over the younger, of the educated over the ignorant.

However, there are quite as many mistresses who would be as much surprised at such a suggestion, as

Jane Lowe herself would have been at any authoritative interference with her love affairs or the costume in which it pleased her to appear on her days out. That she should be suitably and respectably dreseed in the house had been mere matter of bargain and agreement between her employer and herself. In the streets, unless sent on an errand, she hardly considered herself a servant at all, and was in the habit of shaking out her hair in a mass of ringlets over her shoulders, wearing as many colours as could possibly be got together, and a dress not on the pattern of her mistress's—for that lady was, in Miss Jane's estimation, a "dowdy"—but as nearly like a fashion-plate as sixteen pounds a-year would admit of. She was a thoroughly clever servant, with the respectful well-trained manners of the best specimens of her class; and if she contrived to get plenty of amusement for herself, laughed at her mistress behind her back, and dressed above her station, why, those were none of them matters mentioned in the contract she had entered into, and so long as none of her work was neglected, Jane felt she did her duty and earned her wages honestly. There are scores of servants like Jane, and scores of mistresses ready to blame them, especially when they carry their clever services and smooth manners elsewhere in search of a "little change," their love of which is one of their greatest crimes in the eyes of modern housewives. These good ladies loudly lament the "days that are no more," forgetting perhaps that the grapes were sour then, and girls could not, however much they wished it, run about from place to place as they do now. According to Richard Gad, "seven-and-ninepenny returns" have much to answer for.

But neither Gad, twisting straw bands in the harvest-field with his wife, nor perplexed mistresses of little

maids, can stem the tide of time that is changed, and changing still.

"Only once a month! Lor', you *are* silly! ain't there two of you at Franks's?" was Jane's exclamation, when Lydia came to see her on the first Sunday that she had been out at all, for she attended the service at the school chapel.

Jane would have spoken civilly of her mistress's friend had her mistress been within hearing, but it is the fashion of high life below stairs to use surnames only; Lydia, to whom this fashion was new, could not help staring, but answered that there *were* two of them at Franks's, the cook and herself.

"Then you should have held out for every other Sunday, turn and turn about, and a week-day for shopping once a month. That's fair and reasonable."

"Should I want to go shopping so often?" asked Lydia dubiously.

"There you go, little silly! If it's not shopping exactly, isn't it the parks, or a penny boat down the river and back with your young man? I'd say the theyater if it wasn't for Franks's not letting you out at night. What was you about to agree to that?"

To do Jane justice, any rule agreed to at the time a servant was engaged was sacred in her eyes.

Lydia explained that it was her parents who had stipulated that she was not to be out after dark; it was the one stipulation they had made, and since Mrs. Franks had not only said they were wise and right in their decision, but that she would never think of taking a girl so young as Lydia on any other understanding, Jane could say no more, and only volunteered to "put her friend up to getting all the little fun going by daylight."

She kept her word. Lydia's mistress had no fault to find with the child, who was steady and conscientious in her work, as her mother's daughter was sure to be, except that she asked leave too often to go out. Not that she ever did this when it was really inconvenient, showing much judgment in only preferring the request at times when there could be no reasonable pretext for denying it, and always saying with whom she was going. Mrs. Franks could not object to Jane Lowe's companionship for Lydia, for Jane's mistress was a great friend of the chaplain's wife, and spoke well of her clever servant, whom as yet she only knew at her best. Mrs. Franks only thought Lydia went out too often for her own happiness, since she was apt to be discontented and gloomy after a day's pleasuring. But a floor can be just as well swept with a gloomy face as a gay one. Mrs. Franks had nothing to do with Lydia's temper, so long as she kept it to herself and never "answered;" bad temper or good was not "in the bond," and all that concerned only Lydia.

Jane was not a bad girl—a trifle saucy and bold perhaps, but knowing how to take care of herself, and holding her head high. She stood, where hundreds of young servant-girls are standing, on the brink only of a precipice; it was safe walking still as long as a false step was avoided; none of them paused to remember that at best the edge of a precipice is a dangerous place. If now and then one missed her footing and fell, the girls who were still respectable scorned her as their betters did, and went on their own way as thoughtlessly as before. As yet Jane led Lydia into nothing worse than scenes of vulgar noisy merriment, that used to make the little thing blush and shrink, and fancy what "mother would say of them," and feel that she would be sorry for Joel to see her there.

But she had no one else to go out with. Her fellow-servant was a woman of thirty, with cares and anxieties of her own that made her a dull companion, her chief good quality in the eyes of Lydia being that she did not care for going out herself, and was ready to let the child have more than her fair share of liberty. They could never be both absent at once from a place where only two servants were kept, or Martha would have been a safer friend than any Lydia made or was likely to make through Jane Lowe.

Her mistress wondered now and then at Martha's depressed looks, at her poor clothes, and the penniless condition she always appeared to be in, though her wages were good. Once or twice the thought crossed Mrs. Franks's mind that the woman must have some secret claim upon her; and after a disreputable-looking man had been seen at the gate, hanging about and inquiring for Martha Fax, her mistress could give a good guess that it was an idle drunken husband that swallowed up all her cook's wages. But where was the use of asking if this were the case? Martha was a fair cook, an honest trustworthy servant; as long as she continued to be so her secret troubles concerned herself only. Since she was careful never to admit the disreputable man into her neat kitchen, it was no one's affair but her own if, when work was over and Lydia out, Martha Fax, sitting by the fire, faithfully banked up with cinders as it should be, wrung her hands and moaned to herself over her spoilt life.

On one point Martha and her mistress were agreed. Mrs. Franks did not allow her servants to receive visits from their friends, and Martha was very strict in carrying out this rule; she said "she did not hold with strangers in her kitchen; people coming and going, perhaps just

about meal-times, so that she could never answer for her odds and ends, or feel easy in her mind about the week's bills, which were apt, as every cook knows, to run up unaccountable if a strange mouth so much as looked at the loaf and the butter at tea, or if any one just called in when the meat for dinner was on table." Martha liked her kitchen to herself quite as much as Mrs. Franks liked that it should be so kept; Lydia would never have seen a soul to speak to, she used to say, if Jane's mistress had not been different.

So long as things went on well up-stairs, and the household bills betrayed no great amount of feasting below, that lady did not trouble her head as to who went and came down the area steps. She was an easy mistress, and the place one that servants liked—while they stayed, for certainly changes in the household were frequent; a year was considered a long service in that family, and the cook, who had been there three, was looked upon as an old retainer.

"Who wants more than a twelvemonth's good character? A girl must be a silly if she can't get that, and then be free to better herself and have another peep at the world. You take and stop your year round at Franks's, and you'll be able to get somewhere a bit livelier," said Jane, one day when a friend or two of hers, Lydia amongst them, had just looked in to see her.

"A year's a long time in prison though," remarked a tall slip of a girl with an exquisitely pretty face, whose native air of refinement was vulgarised by the tawdry dress, outraging every canon of good taste. She had only been up from the country some eighteen months; though she was long past blushing and shrinking as Lydia did, there was an innocent, countrified look about her

still; and if ever maid was a trial to a mistress who really had her servant's welfare and happiness at heart, such a trial was Rhoda Lee. It was impossible to knock any other idea into the pretty empty head than that mistresses were the natural enemies of servant-girls, and people to be hoodwinked and blinded whenever chance offered. A new reading of the saying, "All is fair in love and war," seemed to have occurred to Rhoda; all was fair between mistress and maid, she thought. Truthful enough amongst her equals, she never dreamt of speaking the truth to her employers: "Say what's expected, whatever will make things pleasant," was her creed. Nor did she blush to confess a falsehood after it had once served her turn. Rhoda had called herself two-and-twenty when she first came to her place; a little later, for some reason or other, it suited her to acknowledge her real age, which was nineteen.

"Then you told me an untruth," said her mistress.

"Well, ma'am, you wouldn't have taken me, would you now, if you'd knowed I was but nineteen? You said a deal about my looking too young for London service, and I was bound to get a place."

"How many more falsehoods have you told me?"

"How many have you found me out in, ma'am?" says Rhoda.

What was to be done with a girl like that? Every one liked her. So pleasant and smiling, with a funny half-familiar way with her that was too *naïve* to be disrespectful —(it was hopeless to try and train Rhoda to conventional servant manners)—clever enough to do her work fairly, but taking refuge in childish tears at the veriest syllable of reproof, and telling fibs by the score—she had not even the sterling honesty of character by which Jane

Lowe recognised that her half of the contract between employer and employed was binding on her. Rhoda had come up to London to enjoy herself, and taken service as the only means open to her of attaining her end. The performance of a certain amount of work was a necessary evil, for which she pitied herself so sincerely that she was honestly surprised her mistrsss did not pity her for it also.

The girl came from the same part of Sussex, though not from the same village, as Lydia, which, although they had not known each other before, was a tie between them. She, too, knew that she could go back home whenever she liked, sure of a welcome in the cottage amongst the green lanes and hop-gardens, as long as she chose to stay there before starting anew, always with that indispensable twelvemonth's character, on her shiftless, thoughtless, happy-go-lucky course.

"A year's a long time in prison," said Rhoda, "and it's nothing *but* prison when you've got to ask leave every time you want to run out."

These words caused Lydia to give a sigh to the memory of her first little place, where she never had to ask leave, it being quite a matter of course that she was free to run round to her friend next door, or even "down street" to her mother's, whenever there was nothing to do.

"*I* consider we should have our afternoons to ourselves —or our evenin's at anyhow, same as the young ladies behind the counters does," said a thorough London girl, older than the others, and who was a relative of the housemaid's young man.

"I consider you *do* have your afternoons to yourself," remarked the cook, turning round from the fire, over which she was preparing one of her *entrées* for the late

dinner; "you've been in here three times this week already. Don't go putting nonsense into Lyddy's head: she's got to stop her year where she is, and then I shouldn't wonder if she came to us, always supposin' she had a mind to it."

Cook looked at the housemaid as she spoke, and the housemaid giggled. That young person was engaged to be married, and was now stitching at her new clothes, a good stock of which she intended to take with her. She sat perched up on the dresser beneath the window, in order to make the most of the light, of which there is never too much in a London kitchen. A pile of the house linen it was part of her duty to keep in repair had fallen to the floor. She meant to attend to it by-and-by, or to enough of it to ensure the mistress seeing no holes in anything in use—what more could any mistress want? It was her own fault if she never took the trouble to scrutinise the heaps in the farthest recesses of the linen cupboard. There would be a general turn-out of the cupboard one of these fine days, and an outcry against servants who were never to be depended upon if left to themselves; but before that day came it would suit the housemaid to give warning herself, or if the worst came to the worst, where *she* was going they'd not ask for a character from her last place, the girl said laughing.

Then they all fell to talking of dress. The London girl had brought in her pocket one of those tempting advertisements of cheap sales which are such a snare to slender purses. Lydia could hardly believe her ears as the wonderful bargains were read out. Her first quarter was nearly due, and the subject interested her, especially when she found that both Rhoda and Jane intended quite as a matter of course to send part of their wages home. Girls

of this class are mostly affectionate daughters. Rhoda had a whole lot of untidy brothers and sisters, and all the money she could spare from the finery her soul delighted in went to help feed and clothe the younger ones. Something for mother, the rest on their backs, was the rule for all these girls, whose incidental expenses were heavy, by the way. One does not go trips down the river, or treat a friend to the play and a bit of supper afterwards, for nothing. These "area belles" found it quite as difficult to dress within their allowance as some of their betters—though not their elders—did upstairs. Young maids as well as young ladies have temptations to extravagance, and it may be a moot point which class should have most sense to resist the temptation, or most charity in judging of the other.

Just as the drawing-room bell rang, and Jane whisked on her white apron and ran upstairs to answer it, a plan had been arranged for the friends to meet for a grand day's shopping and a treat of some kind after it. Lydia was to ask leave out for the occasion; which she duly did, and came home, poor child, with all her money spent on bargains over which Martha Fax lifted up her hands and eyes in dismay, and which to Lydia herself appeared flimsy and worthless enough, viewed in the strong common-sense daylight of next morning. She had been more than usually annoyed and frightened at the vulgar boisterous folly of Jane's set, and for some time did not go near them again. It was a real grief to her to have no money left to send home. A few shillings even would have been worth so much more than the flimsy material she had fancied, when she bought it, would make such genteel showy frocks for her little sisters. She was ashamed to send it now. If only she had thought to get strong pretty

print instead. But the stuff Lydia had been persuaded into taking was to be had such a bargain that the temptation had proved too strong, especially when backed by the argument of Jane Lowe, who had laughed at Lydia for a "dowdy," when she bought the warm petticoat she really needed, and spoke of sending similar ones to her sisters. They could get such things as that at the shop "up street" any day, Jane declared. What Lydia ought to send home was something elegant, such as would be known at once to have come from London.

The chief grief, however, was not to have saved a little money to send where she knew money would have been so welcome. The child fretted over it, mingling tears with the hot water in her pail as she scrubbed the stairs, and going about her work in a listless heart-broken fashion. It was now, when she could no longer seek the companionship of her friends, that she recognised the loneliness of the crowded streets. Sometimes when she was sent on an errand she would stand for a moment watching the people pass. Strangers—all strangers; not one to nod a greeting or give a kind word. Lydia would wipe away a tear, thinking of the friendly faces at home, where the snow was lying white on the fields by now, and the boys sliding on the pond under the pollard trees. Was the wood-stack large this year? Had mother paid up all her coal club so that there was fuel enough to meet the cold weather? Were they all keeping well, or was little James peaky this winter as he had been last? Who was up at the Hall in the place Lydia might have had? She scrawled these questions in her letter home, beginning "This comes hoping you are all well as it leaves me at present." She was home-sick to the heart's core, but determined to stay bravely on, and earn that twelvemonth's

good character that was to be her stock-in-trade. Mother should have every penny of her wages next quarter.

But before next quarter came her mistress had spoken to her about the shabby appearance of her afternoon dress, and the raggedness of her working frock. The finery Lydia had bought could only be worn on her days out, and it behoved her to be respectable and neat when she went to open the door, or waited at table. The spring was come too; wild flowers were being sold in the streets, the days grew longer. Pining, as was only natural at her age, for a little amusement, Lydia ventured out with Jane once more, and they had another frolic together. What was the good of having a smart dress and gay parasol and bonnet if one never wore them? The strong print working frock, the tidy afternoon dress, and a couple of new white aprons, left only a few shillings for her mother. Those she did send home, and as a consequence she got into debt to Jane for the trifle her share of the expenses of their frolic came to.

As the year dragged itself away, Lydia began to lose her dislike to the company to which Jane introduced her, and to feel more at home in it. She began to wish Joel were in London, so that she too might have a young man to take her out; she even thought seriously of getting a new place in town when her year was up, instead of looking for one nearer home. Rhoda meant to advertise for a situation as parlour-maid where a footman was kept. Why should not Lydia do the same? It was as well to see life while one was young, before all the fun was gone out of it, and one had no spirit left to do anything but mope as Martha Fax did. The very loneliness and home-sickness from which the child had suffered for a time helped to throw her back upon the companions

she had deserted, and helped to make her fall into their ways.

It was well on in the summer, the streets were hot and close, so close that the free space of the court surrounded by the almshouses was cool and fresh compared to them. It was pleasant to turn in there out of the glare. The old men and women sat at their open doors; Mrs. Franks was careful that the grass should be kept well watered, so as to look green and pleasant to the old eyes; in this warm weather Lydia sat at her work by the open window, where she could see the grass and watch the stirring of the leaves on the trees, as every now and then a faint breeze reached them; she had some flowers in a mug of water by her side, and looked the very picture of a contented little servant-maid. But Lydia was thinking of home, and in her own mind regretting what she had thrown away. She might have been sitting in the tea-room at the hall, where the under-maids did their needlework of afternoons. The shadows would be growing long and falling slantwise across the drying-ground on to which the room looked. The voices of the young gentlemen and the little ladies would be heard from time to time as the children played in the gardens beyond the wall; now and again some one would come to the back-door with a message or on business. The housekeeper would allow no dawdling, and be quite as strict as Martha Fax was with regard to idle visitors, but there would be a kind word for all who came, and a life and stir about the place which was wanting here; moreover, every one she came across would have a friendly word for Lyddy. And on Sundays Joel would be up in the gallery at church, and perhaps walk home with Lydia after service, though they never had "walked together" regularly

before she came away. By this time very likely Joel had taken up with some other lass. Lydia could scarcely see the green grass or waving boughs, or the old goodies standing for a breath of air at their open doors—she could scarcely see it all for the mist of tears before her eyes.

Presently there came a ring at the bell; a servant had brought a note requiring an answer. While Mrs. Franks answered the note, Lydia was desired to take the young woman into the kitchen. Lydia was glad to obey; she liked the looks of the stranger, and company in the kitchen was rare.

Ruth was a different style of girl from any Lydia had yet met, but there are girls of this sort to be found here and there; it would be well if there were more of them. Her father was a labourer on a farm in Berkshire, and Ruth, the eldest daughter of a large family, had actually kept her first place six years. She was now nearly four-and-twenty, and had only lately come to London. She had had no difficulty in getting a good place; her late mistress gave her an excellent character, only parting with her because she could not give the higher wages Ruth was now worth, and expressing a hope that she might be as valuable to her future employers as she had proved to those she was leaving. Her quiet tasteful dress and pleasant face struck Lydia at once.

"I should say you were from the country too," Ruth said, smiling at the flowers.

"I do just wish I was back there!" cried Lydia.

"It's a quiet pretty place you have here; one would not look to find it amongst all these streets," Ruth observed.

Lydia liked the strange quiet of the place well enough herself, but to-day her heart was full.

"It's not like home," she said, lifting her apron to her eyes and indulging in a little sniff that went to Ruth's heart.

Her next sister was a girl about Lydia's age. Before the sound of the parlour-bell disturbed them, Lydia had heard all about this sister, and the little brother in the Child's Hospital. It was Ruth who had paid for an invalid carriage to bring the child up safely, and give him at least a chance to grow into a strong man after a terrible accident that had at one time threatened to leave the little fellow crippled for life. It had taken all Ruth's savings to do this, as well as to provide comforts for him before he was moved. Ruth had not grudged her savings. The money was there; how better could it be spent, she said, than on the one amongst them that most needed it? Domestic servants are the least provident of all classes. They hardly ever lay by anything. Those who do not recklessly waste their wages are sure to have claims of kindred which, to their honour be it said, they never ignore. Ruth was a case in point; one amongst scores of good girls who do the same. And she was a good girl. Both in her first place and where she was now living she had been quite as much left to herself as Rhoda, or Jane, or Lydia. Her mistresses did not concern themselves with her friendships, or the manner in which she spent her leisure time. They looked only to her services. And no services were more faithful than those of Ruth; she might be so thoroughly trusted, and was the same behind her employers' backs as before their faces, the same even in her quiet manners and respectable dress; whereas one could tell by the very tone of Jane's voice whether or not her mistress were within hearing.

The secret may have been that Ruth was a truly religious person. What else could have kept her, or keeps those like her, on a straight course? The tree may be known by its fruit. The "Girls' Friendly Society" helps, they say, to make thoughtless little servants more such as Ruth was, and well it is for those who belong to that society, the very existence of which, however, is another recognition that domestic servants, like shop-girls and seamstresses, are a class apart, needing help from strangers, and that there is no stronger tie between those who live, one family beneath one roof, than between any other class of employers and employed. Times are changed from the days when every girl looked naturally to her own mistress to be her "friend"—an old-fashioned notion, long since exploded. Yet in a certain old Book there is an allusion to this old fashion, it is even used as a type of something higher: "Behold, even as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; even so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God."

Is it possible that mistresses and maids alike might gain something by becoming old-fashioned to this extent?

The friendship of Ruth did much to reconcile Lydia to her place, which was really a good one, and which Ruth strongly urged her to keep now she had got it, to keep at least for a year or two. Ruth did not think it fair to leave a kind mistress for no better reason than that prevailing restless wish for change.

"We should not think it fair if we was parted with only because a lady liked to see new faces about her," Ruth said, laughing; "when we've once taken service it seems to me as we are bound not to throw up a situation lightly,

but to make the best of it, just as we expect ladies not to give us warning without some real reason."

Unfortunately these girls could see very little of one another; they lived far apart, and met seldom; and the fact that Lydia owed Jane money seemed to give her a new claim upon her, so that Lydia did not like to refuse to join in any scheme of pleasure when Jane was so ready sometimes to treat her, at others to lend her another shilling or two. When families began to go out of town for change of air in the hot weather, there was not a little excitement and secret heartburning amongst their servants as to what date would be fixed for departure, who would be left in charge, and whose turn would come first for the summer holiday all had stipulated for. Like a true Sussex girl, Lydia had begged that her holiday might be in hopping time. Once she had intended to give warning, so as to be free by then, for her year would be up at the end of September; now, acting under Ruth's advice, she had made up her mind to stay at least through another winter, though as the summer wore on she felt sadly home-sick, and liked better to walk in the parks with Ruth on her Sundays out than to go merry-making with Jane.

Ruth had been quite shocked at Lydia's finery, and the child had resented the "talking-to" the other gave her, just such a talking-to as she would have given her own young sister; and though after it Lydia really was so far ashamed of her appearance as to put up her hair tidily and wear her simplest dress when she and Ruth were together, she could not resist shaking down her curls and wearing all her feathers and flounces now and then, which was another reason that kept her and her best friend apart, and threw her into worse company.

Late in August the family with whom Jane Lowe lived left town. Jane was the first to be left in charge of the house; and though she did not do as two friends of hers did, sisters also left in charge—lock the door behind her and go out regularly every day for all day long, leaving the house to take care of itself, and no one to attend to messages or letters in case any should come—she yet contrived to get plenty of amusement for herself by asking an old charwoman she knew to take her place every two or three days. It was well worth the charwoman's while to oblige any of the servants in that house. Though the servants were on board-wages when the family were away, at other times there was many a good meal, and many a bundle of cold scraps to be had for the asking, so that the charwoman made no difficulty in coming whenever Jane wanted her.

The first Sunday in September happened to be Lydia's day out, and Rhoda's as well. They both went to see Jane. Rhoda had had her holiday, and had been down home, and had come back again only on the day before. Ruth in her place would not have claimed her Sunday at once; but Rhoda never considered any one but herself. She brought Lydia a great nosegay of flowers, not London flowers, but a real cottage nosegay, made sweet with a great sprig of southernwood—"old man" the girls call it—the very scent of which made Lydia begin to fret, it so recalled home and mother to the foolish child whose little heart after all was in the right place. To cheer her up, Jane began proposing a day down the river—the next day but one, which would give the other two girls time to ask leave and do up their best things; after that Lydia's own holiday would be so near at hand she would have no time to fret any more.

Rhoda had not hesitated to say she would be of the party, but when she asked for the necessary permission she could hardly believe her ears at the answer. One of the children was ill; and it would not be convenient to spare Rhoda; her mistress was surprised she should make such a request when she had but just come home. Rhoda burst into a flood of tears, and was so saucy there was no help for it but to give her warning. She would be glad to leave, she said, between her sobs, glad to leave a place where a poor servant was shut up like a prisoner, and if her mistress had not spoken first, Rhoda would have given warning herself. Meantime, she could not join Jane's party on the Tuesday, for she was not mad enough to throw away the nearly two years' character she had earned, as she considered so hardly, and get turned off at a day's notice in disgrace. She resigned herself as best she might, and went about her work with injured looks and in floods of tears.

After Lydia got back to her tiny bedroom, with its window looking out upon the quiet green space below, and had put her flowers in water, she felt half-inclined not to speak to her mistress, not to go merry-making at all before she went home at the end of the month. But Martha was cross that evening, crosser still the next morning, there was no pleasing her, and in a hasty moment Lydia did prefer her request to Mrs. Franks. That lady was going out herself for all day on Tuesday; Lydia would really not be wanted, and she spoke as she always did, so civilly and prettily, hanging her head in the modest little way she had not yet lost, that it was a pleasure to say Yes, and watch her dimple and smile, and hear the low grateful "Thank you, ma'am, I'm sure," as she dropped the curtsey not yet quite left off, although

Lydia did not make as many as when she had first come to London. The day for her holiday was fixed at the same interview. Lydia ran back to her sweet flowers and her fine frock up-stairs, in the very best of spirits.

She set off very early on Tuesday, and if her own mother had met her in the streets it may be doubted whether she would have known the poor child. Lydia's well-oiled curls hung over her shoulders in a great bush, upon the top of which was poised her gay blue bonnet, and her flimsy delaine dress had a train that swept the dirty pavement as she walked, but was not so long now as Lydia would have liked to see it; she wore soiled tight kid gloves, and her parasol was trimmed with cheap lace. Had her train only been a *few* inches longer, she would have been quite happy; but there is a thorn to every rose. At the last moment Lydia had stuck a bit of southernwood in her dress. Perhaps it was owing to the familiar scent that a thought of home seemed to linger about her, that she felt every now and then uncomfortable and out of spirits, and that whenever she felt so she said to herself that this should be her very last frolic in London, that when she came back she would dress like Ruth, enjoy quiet pleasures as she did, and sell her fine things for a shilling or so—for whatever they would fetch: mother would not like them. But this one holiday Lydia would look "genteel," even if it were to be for the last time in her life.

Arrived at Jane's door, Lydia found that young person in a high state of indignation. Her master had telegraphed overnight to say business would bring him to town that day, and Jane knew she dared not be out when he came. She bade Lydia be on the look-out for Rhoda at the wharf, and impressed upon her the name of the

boat by which it had been agreed the party should go down the river. It was one of the larger boats below the bridges, for they were to have a long day out, and to take the cheap excursion tickets which led to such overcrowding, but were after all very convenient. Other friends of Jane's were going, one or two young men, and the girls they were keeping company with. These were fully described to Lydia, who was to keep her eyes open, and give Jane's messages to them all. It was more convenient to take a penny boat at the nearest landing stage and go down to the wharf, at which Rhoda would be sure to meet her; accordingly that was what Lydia did, feeling half important half frightened at going quite by herself. Her fright wore off only too soon. She attracted a great deal of attention, so much so that a respectable-looking elderly man, who had daughters of his own in service, spoke to her and advised her to go home again.

"You're too young, my lass, to be out this way by yourself," he said kindly.

Lydia, with a toss of her head, told him she was to meet her friends lower down, and if not she hoped she could take care of herself.

"You ain't forgot your cloak, or shawl, or whatever it is, have you?" he asked dryly; "you need something to hide all them tags and bobtails."

He could not but be sorry for the child, trying to ape the lowest style of town-bred girls, and yet with an innocent countrified look about her all the time, in spite of her tawdry dress. However, she would have none of his advice or protection, though she coloured when he bade her think whether her own father would be pleased to see her as she was then; and though she turned away

from him pettishly, somehow or other the scent of the southernwood seemed stronger for a moment; she even put her hand to it and touched it.

There was no Rhoda at the wharf. When Lydia had pushed, or rather had been pushed and jostled by the crowd, up to the place where the tickets were given, and had taken hers, paying for it with money lent her by Jane, she looked about anxiously for her friend. There was no sign of her anywhere. Lydia would have to go on board in a few minutes, or to give it up altogether. She was quite inclined to do the latter, when her eyes fell suddenly upon a figure oddly familiar to her—as familiar as the scent of the "old man" at her waistbelt. A young countryman stood a little apart from the crowd, and apparently watching Lydia with curiosity. He turned away, however, at the moment she caught sight of him; she sprang forward.

"Joel! why, it ain't never you?"

"It is *you*, then; I couldn't hardly believe my own eyes," said Joel, looking at her from head to foot in a way that made her feel hot all over.

"You 'ain't got a good memory for an old friend, then; it's not so long since I left home but that you might know me by sight," she said.

"Who are you with?" asked Joel sharply.

A young man and two girls, with whom Lydia had made acquaintance on the penny boat, were close to her, and began now to laugh and joke, declaring Lydia was with them. She explained to Joel that she was to meet a friend for whom she was now on the look-out. He did not seem satisfied, but explained in his turn that he had been sent up on a matter of business by his master, and was putting up at the hotel in the Strand where his

"The young man and the girls now began to laugh and joke."

master was known. Joel had strolled down to the wharf to look at the to him novel sight of the crowded river-boats.

"I was thinking to look in at your place to-day, Lyddy; I've a letter from your mother for you, and a posy as the children sent, and a big bit of honeycomb—your mother's hives have done well this season. If you can't find your friend, let's come along together; I've just time to spare to see you home," he said.

Lydia wished he had proposed to go with her, or even asked her simply to take a walk with him; she would have done that readily enough, and asked no better amusement than to have a long talk of home, and hear all the village news. But the proposal to see her home at once made her new friends laugh, and there was such a tone of disapproval, almost of reproof, in Joel's voice, and such unmistakeable disapprobation in the look he gave her, that her pride rose. He behaved as a grave elder brother might have done who was vexed to see his sister in unsuitable company. She tossed her oiled ringlets, and said in a loud pert voice, that she was not going home, and had no intention of disappointing her friends. He could tell mother he had seen her, and that she was well and happy, and as for the honeycomb, he could take it to Franks's if he had a mind, and leave it for her. She was sorry she would not be in to have a visit from him, but they'd meet before the month was out; unless, indeed, he liked to join the party now. Wouldn't his master's business keep?

Joel glanced at his own dress, and that of Lydia's smart companions, and laughed dryly. It was all the answer he made, as he turned away. For one moment Lydia thought she *must* follow him. The tall broad-

shouldered young fellow pushed his way through the crowd; if he had so much as looked back after her, Lydia would have made up her mind to give up the day's excursion; but Joel never turned his head.

The people began to press on board; in such a crowd it was no wonder she had missed Rhoda, on deck they would soon run against each other. The bit of southernwood fell from Lydia's dress at that moment; as she stooped to pick it up the thought in her mind was, that she would show Joel she was her own mistress, and could take care of herself, and come to no harm if she did wear smarter clothes than he had ever seen her in before; but that she would make it up with him during her holiday at home. There had been something in Joel's manner that told Lydia as plainly as words could have done that he had not yet at all events taken up with any other girl. Still, what a stupid thing to do, to look reproachfully at her before strangers, and be so grave and glum with her instead of laughing and chaffing as other young men did! Lydia would not be called to order by him. And having recovered her bit of southernwood, she turned round to see if he really had gone quite away, or was lingering for a last look. There was no sign of him, however. The homely figure in the countrified dress had quite disappeared. On all sides of her were only pale-faced young men, flashily dressed, smoking and talking together, or with girls like herself; respectable families, father, mother, and children all together, and bent upon a well-earned holiday; here and there young couples of tidy working-people, evidently upon a little wedding-trip, for which no more than one long happy day could be spared. But the wonderful number of children was the chief feature in the crowd now passing on deck as quickly as

might be. Babies in arms, little children just able to run alone, and for the most part perched on their fathers' shoulders, children of all sorts, sizes, ages, and descriptions. The presence of so many of them implied that of the mothers also; the men were not taking holiday by themselves; it was good to think how many hard-worked wives were to have a day's outing for once. But the great steamer seemed perilously overcrowded; the people were packed together like sheep. What chance would there be to find Rhoda, or Jane's other friends in such a throng? Lydia's eyes began to grow large with fright as she pushed slowly on towards the gangway.

Meantime Joel had walked away in a mood between anger and disappointment. He had looked forward to seeing Lydia, and he had hardly known her when he did see her. How changed she was! and yet the tone of that first "Joel!" when she had sprung to meet him, seemed to say she was not *quite* so much changed as she appeared to be. But there! she was not worth thinking of. He would trouble his head about her no more. Let her go her own way with her smart London friends, and dressed up so as her own mother would not know her, let alone an honest hard-working lad, who might perhaps have looked to keeping company with her one of these days, but was cured of the wish now. Joel went about his business with an odd feeling that he had lost something or other, a feeling he could not account for. He tried to put Lydia out of his thoughts altogether, and indeed succeeded pretty well in doing so, until late in the evening a rumour spread in the town—a rumour that made his heart stand still. A large river steamer had gone down with six hundred souls on board—the Princess Alice! Surely that was the name which he had seen

painted on the ship while he stood idly watching the crowd, and idly wondering what it could be that struck him as familiar about a gaily-dressed girl near him!

In all his life Joel never forgot that night nor the next morning, when the rumour was fully confirmed, and the daily papers were full of the ghastly details of the terrible disaster.

Lyddy! Little Lyddy! He wished he had had a kind word from her. He wished he had been kinder himself, and persuaded her to come away with him. It was his doing, his fault! What else should have led him there—he who was not used to linger or dawdle at any time—what else should have led him to join for a few moments that idle crowd, if it was not a good Providence, who had meant him to save Lyddy? And he had not done it; he had let her go to her death. The poor fellow was half beside himself. In the great cry of sore trouble and anguish that went up from the whole city that terrible day, there was no cry more bitter than that of Joel. He felt he might have saved her had he been more patient, if the tawdry flaunting dress, the draggled skirt, had not disgusted him so much. Poor little draggled skirt! What would he not give to see it now?

Later in the day he went to the alms-houses, taking with him, almost without thinking, the great posy and the piece of honeycomb, although he knew Lydia was not there, but beneath the dark greasy water, or—Joel could not bear to think where she might be, or to remember that perhaps he ought to go down and identify the body when it should be recovered. And then fierce indignation against Lydia's mistress took possession of him. Her mistress should have taken more care of a young girl like that than to have allowed her to be there, and in such

companionship! And yet Joel had seen with his own eyes how many respectable people were on board; he recognised that if Lydia had gone with steady friends, and had been steady herself, no one would have had any reason to object to such a day's pleasure for her. Between these mingled thoughts of grief for Lydia, anger against himself, and the prospect before him of bringing back to the village such news as this, there was not a more miserable young fellow in the world than Joel, when he pushed open the iron gate in the high wall and went up to the chaplain's door.

His hand shook so much that his first ring was unheard, as Lydia's first ring at that same door had been, and like her he stood for a moment looking about him. A quiet peaceful spot, he thought. The comparative silence after the ceaseless noise of the streets soothed him. When he summoned courage to ring again, Martha Fax appeared, and asked him shortly enough what was his business.

"The young woman as lived here—Lydia Gad, I should say," stammered Joel. "It is a piece of honeycomb as her mother sent up, thinking Lydia might like to ask her mistress to accept of it. I've brought it, and I've brought the posy too;" he held the gifts towards her.

"She ain't allowed no followers; Mrs. Franks never has allowed none; and I don't hold with followers myself," began Martha; "but — you've heard the news, young man?"

Joel nodded; his white face told that he understood.

"It have been a shock to her; I don't say as for once in a way I wouldn't get leave for you to come in. She's that upset as a face from home might do her more good than anything else, and if, as you says, it was her own mother as sent you——why, what's wrong with you?"

Martha might well ask what was wrong. Joel shook from head to foot, the face so blanched a moment before was flushed—he looked like a man who had been drinking.

"Were she saved then?" he gasped out.

"Ay, by the Lord's mercy she *were* saved; it will be a lesson to her for the rest of her days."

"I heard as there was some, a very few, picked up," said Joel, with a heavy sigh of unspeakable relief.

"Picked up! She weren't never in the water at all. You didn't suppose as she was on board, did you? Here—Lyddy!"

Martha stepped back into the passage as she spoke; Joel followed as though in a dream. At the kitchen-door a little figure in neat print dress and working apron, but with its face very pale and eyes red with weeping, met them.

"It's your young man," said Martha, jumping to conclusions; "and followers ain't allowed, but I'll just step up to mistress and mention as I let him in myself for once in a way; it's not every day as the dead is alive again, and the lost is found."

Martha's troubles had not hardened her heart so much that she could not feel for these young things. They stood holding each other by the hand; Lydia's head was bent.

"No," she said, in answer to Joel's questions, "I didn't go on board; I'd a mind to it, just to spite you, Joel, I tell you the truth, for before you come up I'd grown afraid; and I grew afraid again just at the last—there was a man as was rude to me," said Lydia, blushing furiously, "so I got out of the crowd and come away home. But oh! I don't know if Rhoda was there or

not! and there's two girls as went out early—friends of Jane Lowe's they are, and they never come back at night. Jane thinks they must be gone. Oh Joel! ain't it terrible?"

She was crying bitterly again as she had been doing off and on all day, but the tears may have been a little less bitter now from the fact that they were shed on Joel's shoulder.

"It was the woman as let me in who said I were your young man," began honest Joel shyly. "We 'ain't never said such a thing ourselves yet, Lyddy, but we'll keep company now, dear, won't we?"

"Have done!" said Lydia, wiping her eyes and retreating to the other side of the kitchen, as Martha came back with the required permission for Lydia to make her friend welcome.

Lydia had a talk with her mistress that evening, for the girl gave warning after all; she had been too much upset to stay on in London, she said, and Mrs. Franks thought that quite as bad a reason for throwing up a place as the mere love of change would have been. From her point of view, it certainly was provoking that since Lydia had been with her a whole year, and knew her ways, the girl could not be content to stay on and get over the shock where she was. It was by no means a hard place, the wages were good, and although with such a fellow-servant as Martha Fax a young girl may have found it dull at home, yet she had plenty of leave out, and what more *could* she want? Of the temptations that beset the child of seventeen, of her craving for home faces, and the dawning wish to lead a safer and more guarded life, Mrs. Franks knew absolutely nothing. Her arguments were of no avail; sorry as she was to part

with her little servant, inconvenient as it was to lose a machine that did its work well and regularly, there was no help for it. Lydia had fairly earned her twelve-month's good character, and, with the certainty of that, went back to the far-off village, bringing to it her little quota of excitement and stir from the outer world, which, however she might from time to time boast of her varied experience in it, she was in no great hurry to see more of.

Before she left town she knew that Rhoda was safe, and had gone crying to her mistress and begging to be taken on again. The sudden death of so many young giddy girls like herself had sobered her for a time. Jane too became more serious. The fate of her friends was dreadful to her. Lydia was thankful no one she knew had been on board the ill-fated vessel, when she saw the pale face of Jane and heard how her voice shook as she spoke of the sisters. Of all the friends Lydia had made, Ruth was the only one she regretted.

In the Sussex village where Mary Gad's large family is growing up around her, there is a quiet steady little maiden, who promises to turn out a second Ruth, for, a month or two after Lydia came home, another chance was offered her, which this time she did not let slip, of becoming, as Mrs. Danvers prettily expresses it, heiress of her mother's broom at the Hall.

DARBY AND JOAN.

THEY had seen it before them all their lives. True the "House" stood two miles and more away; a dreary stretch of road—bleak in cold weather, arid and parched in a hot summer—led to it, while from the village itself it was hidden by thickly clustering trees, an ash coppice that was felled every seventh year, and the many windings of the lane before it joined the highway. But not the less for this, not the less because most of the cottages stood with their backs to it, so that had the copse been grubbed up, the trees cut down, and the lane's flowery hedges gone, the inhabitants still with their outward eyes would not have seen the "House"—not the less because of this was the sight of it present always to their mental vision.

It stood before them a thing to be feared and dreaded, yet to be depended upon when all else failed; sapping much honest independence, yet the last friend of many, as death itself is hailed "friend" by those who have no other left to them. The people shrank from it and looked

to it both at once; it entered into all their calculations; either to get into it or to keep out of it was a matter that occupied their thoughts from year's end to year's end; it was a power felt by young and old, a weight upon young and old, in some shape or other the pivot upon which existence turned, the idea upon which lives were moulded.

One May morning when the air was full of the song of larks, and spring flowers decked the hedges, the unusual sight might have been seen of two old people walking through the village side by side, with apparently no other object than that of taking a walk together. The labourers had gone to work; the women, such of them as were not also afield, were busily engaged at that hour, washing, baking, attending to the multifarious home duties of their lives. Other old people, as far past any work at all as these wayfarers certainly appeared to be, sat at their open doors or in the chimney-corners, some idle quite, some keeping an eye upon little children at their play. Here and there an aged man would make his way slowly to the well in the middle of the village, and bring home more slowly still a pailful of water, though the burden might be almost beyond his failing strength; or another would attempt a little feeble gardening in one of the plots before the cottage doors. Only this couple had leisure, at that early hour, to stroll up the road together, the woman, who was perhaps the least feeble where both were weak, the younger where both were far advanced in years, now and then touching the man upon the shoulder as though to guide his steps, or help to steady the tottering limbs that at times threatened to fail him altogether.

Trifling as was the action of this slight touch upon the arm, it was symbolical of both of them. The labouring man looks much to his "missus," who is generally the

ruling spirit, almost always the true helpmate. From their youth up, since they had been lad and lass together, this Darby had looked to his Joan for the guiding touch that had never failed him yet; from their youth up this Joan had been at hand to cheer, comfort, and sustain her Darby, perhaps the same in her eyes now as when they were courting; for the life-long affection between the simple couple had known no break or change, though the imbecility of old age was creeping over Darby, and time had dimmed the sight and whitened the head of Joan.

Both were poorly dressed. The woman's gown was thin, and patched here and there with so many pieces of other gowns, that which was the original garment and which was "patch" might have been a question difficult to decide. The shabby black bonnet tied under the chin had seen its best days long ago, but the frill of the cap beneath it was spotless, and the worn print apron clean. As for her companion, the short frock or gabardine, made of strong unbleached linen, was strong no longer; it hung a limp rag about the thin figure, and he might with advantage have changed hats with the scare-crow in a field by the wayside. He had a cough that seized him every now and then. At such times he stood still until the fit was over, and then went on again with weak watery eyes that would have made the way hard to find, but for the woman's guiding hand. Poor as they evidently were, with the stamp of utter poverty upon every line of their shabby figures and careworn faces, they were a decent respectable old couple; it was plain at a glance that life had been hard to them, that misfortune and no fault of theirs had brought them to a grief-stricken old age.

To any one with interest enough in their fellow-creatures to notice or wonder at it, it might have ap-

peared strange that these two poor old people should be out for a walk together on a May morning. They walked slowly, looking about them as they went, but hardly ever speaking to one another; indeed the woman was quite silent, though the man now and again addressed some complaining remark to her in a querulous tone.

At a corner where two ways met, a substantial-looking farmhouse stood back from the road. It was but a small farm. The neatly-kept garden was gay with flowers; in the yard on one side a calf stood knee-deep in straw; hens and chickens pecked about the croft in which a sock lamb was nibbling the short grass. There was a comfortable hayrick at the back of the house, and the fields of grain lying farther away had just assumed the tender green hue of spring. The croft was yellow with cowslips.

The woman had begun life as servant in this farmhouse. As she stood for a moment at the gate did she see herself, a tidy lass, working early and late, with a pound or so already tied up in a stocking-foot, and yet contriving to spare a shilling now and then for the extravagance of a new ribbon to her bonnet, when she and Darby, a fine young fellow in those days, walked together on Sunday afternoons? Did she see him coming and going with the other labourers, and always tidy and industrious? Did she see herself stealing out by the dairy door, yonder in the corner where the thick growing laurels made a cool shade always—stealing out to meet him for a word or two? —a little talk perhaps of that cottage beneath the elm trees farther down the lane, and of the eight-day clock to be had so cheap that it would be a pity not to make sure of it while they could; or of the second-hand armchair that father—Darby's father, who was to live with them

always—would find so comfortable? Did *he* with his weak old eyes see all this, or any of it, as the two stood aside to let the carter with a team of horses pass through the gate? The carter gave them a careless glance as he went by, and the old man said peevishly:

"He 'ain't got 'em hitched together right: it weren't so in my time; he 'ain't hitched 'em right."

The woman said nothing, she only stretched out once more the old hand half-palsied with age, to guide her husband past the stones lying thickly in that spot, and amongst which her own feet stumbled.

The pair had not been wholly unobserved in the momentary pause they had made at the farm-gate; the mistress, and the farmer himself, had seen them from the house.

"Look there!" exclaimed the mistress, and there was a touch of indignation as well as pity in her voice, "do you see that? Surely there is something wrong somewhere when old folks who have worked hard all their lives have nothing left but that."

"What would you have? We do our part; the rate is high enough, in all conscience."

"I know it:" she shook her head frowning. The wives of such men as her husband know only too well the pressure of the continual drain upon their incomes that a high poor-rate means. Whether it makes ratepayers more pitiful and forbearing with the poor, or whether it makes the poor look up gratefully to them, may be doubted. There was as much of displeasure as of pity in the look with which the farmer followed the retreating figures of the old man and his wife.

"They should have laid up something against old age," he said.

"Would the poor-law let them?" she answered quickly; "or would sickness or the first hard time they chanced on have used up any savings they might make? because so long as they had a single shilling of their own they could not claim relief. Though rates *are* high—I grant you are right there—I tell you there is something wrong somewhere when the law of the land *makes* paupers of honest folk before it steps in to help them."

The farmer whistled. He may have been used to such outbursts from his wife; he may have been uneasily conscious that what she said was in great part true; he may have been wondering what remedy there was or could be. Certainly his thoughts were occupied with the question that lies so close to the employer of labour as well as to the farm-labourer himself, whose very existence from the cradle to the grave has been so shaped and moulded by it that one wonders what he would be like were he once rid of it for ever and left to stand alone, and yet cannot conceive of him without it, or otherwise than what the poor-law has made him. Certainly the shadow of the workhouse two miles away lay dark and cold upon the sunny farm that morning.

A little lower down the lane a labourer, temporarily out of work, was occupying his idle time in mending the broken door of his cottage. His wife, a tidy comely woman, stood in the little garden watching him at work, and talking across the fence to a lady who had stopped to have a chat with her, and to admire the great tufts of lilac primroses, just now in full beauty. These three persons all turned to look after the old couple walking down the lane together.

"They're going to be took in," the man said, in answer to a question from the lady, a stranger to that neighbour-

hood. "I hear'd as they'd applied for an order to be took into the House."

"It seems hard, don't it?" remarked the wife. "The woman was a hard-working woman always; I've heard my own mother speak of her. The old gentleman he never was but weakly at the best, I believe, but a respectable man all his days; it seems hard."

The lady, possibly with some vague idea that something might be done, or that it might even be the business of some one or other to inquire into such a case as this, and help a deserving couple in old age, asked who were the guardians of the poor in that place.

"Ain't none," answered the man shortly, and giving, as he spoke, a resounding blow or two upon the door from the hammer in his hand.

"Surely you mistake; there must be a poor-law board."

"Oh, *them!*" he looked at her with a shrewd glance; "the *poor-law* guardians you do be meaning. You called 'em out of their name, you see; it's the *law* as they guard hereabouts. I never heard of no guardians for the poor, but One."

He fell to work again more quietly, and his wife said softly that the guardians could do no good, they had not the power—they were good men, she believed—and rates were high; the relieving officer was liked in the village, he was kind always, and no harder with people than the law made him; they had never had occasion to apply to the parish themselves, she said.

"And never will, you mean," the lady added, finding that the sentence was left unfinished.

"She ain't meaning that," her husband answered for her, "and she daren't say it. Ne'er a one of us dare say positive we won't come upon the parish. The county jail

now"—he spoke with so much emphasis that the lady, rather alarmed, and wondering how the jail had got into the conversation, drew back a step or two—"a man can keep out of that if he've a mind to; a man can up and say, I never will go there. He can't say it of the House. It's his own fault if he see the inside of the jail; it's misfortune as brings him to the House, when nothing else does, leastwise, for there's them as seem to run in and out for the pleasure of it. That's not my sort, and yet I daren't say positive, and my missus she daren't say neither, that we won't never come upon the parish!"

"All danger of it seems far from you just now," the lady said, unable to help smiling at the man's vehemence, and casting a look round her at the tidy cottage, neatly-cultivated garden-plot, and general appearance of comfort over everything.

"I've three blessings, as one may say—good health, regular work, and a right-down good missus; but them's blessings—the Lord be thanked for 'em while they're here—as may be took from a man any day, and then, where is he? I'll tell you where he is—not far off from parish pay, and *that's* next door to the House itself."

Here the woman, in a deprecating tone, almost as though fearing the distant workhouse might overhear and be offended, almost as though wishing to propitiate this dreaded power, remarked that when all was said, many were thankful for a safe refuge in hard times—there were very many who would not know where to turn to or what to do if the doors of the workhouse were not open to the homeless and the destitute. "There's Puxty now," she concluded.

"Ay, there's Puxty," repeated the man, with another of those short laughs, "the House is good enough, and too

good, for him. It's true, too, as it can't be done without; I was never meaning that it could be. There was a friend of mine," he continued, striking work altogether for the moment, and taking up a conversational attitude against the doorpost—there was a friend of mine lately as times were uncommon hard with, and he did think of emigrating. There was a gentleman as had 'most talked him over to it; he'd most given his word to go, he had, when the gentleman mentioned there weren't no workhouse in the country what he was recommending so hearty. That staggered my friend, and he drawed back. I don't know as he was altogether wrong. I can't see as he was wrong myself; I can't see as a land where there ain't *no* workhouse can be a safe place for to go and live in for a labouring man."

This man was one of the best specimens of his class, an honest independent labourer, who never yet had taken parish pay, a shrewd, clever working-man. And yet, ingrained in the very nature of him, from force of associations that had clung to him from his birth, was this belief in the necessity of something to fall back upon, something besides his own honest effort to depend upon, and that something the workhouse, than which the county jail itself is not more shunned by our honest poor at home.

"It seems to me what you want is a National Provident Society, guaranteed by Government, so that you could, all of you that would, lay by for old age," the lady said—"a Society that should encourage you to save instead of tending just the other way, as the poor-law seems to do."

"That's what we *do* want," said the man, falling to work again upon the door with such a succession of

heavy blows that the stranger lady, half laughing, nodded a farewell to the woman and went on up the lane.

By this time the old couple were out of sight, and were passing the Elm-tree Cottages, three of them together, or rather one low rambling cottage divided into three; a picturesque building, and one that would have made a pretty picture outside: not quite so pretty perhaps within, where the inmates, half suffocated by night in overcrowded sleeping rooms, awoke morning by morning to wonder what ailed them that they should feel so faint and queer, until the fresh air from the door, wide open all day long, put them to rights again; with an inch or so of water on the floors every wet season, and the thatch rotting overhead from the ceaseless drip of the elm-boughs.

It was many years now since, on the death of Darby's father, the young couple—so old themselves to-day—had left the Elm-tree Cottage and moved elsewhere, in order to be nearer the man's work. But here the early years of their married life were spent, here so long as he lived "father" had sat in the chimney-corner, though even at that time, when these two were young and strong, the shadow of the House fell first upon their path, for to keep the old gentleman out of it entailed self-denial, and occupied their thoughts day by day. They did keep him out of it. There was not the shame and blot upon the honest name of Darby that he had rid himself of the burden as he might have done. Few do that—very few, only one and another here and there, incur the shame of letting their old parents spend their last days in the Union. Joan shared this burden not only faithfully but willingly, in spite of the increasing claims of the young family fast growing up around the pair. "Our children will do the

same for us some day," Joan said. When the old man died at last, husband and wife drew a sigh of mingled regret for the familiar face hid away under the turf, and of relief at a long task ended. For the little children needed all there was to give them. They were none of them strong and hearty as they should have been. Children born and reared in the Elm-tree Cottages never were. Badly-built ill-ventilated houses sap the strength of the rising generation—that is to say, sap the nation's strength—even in the country, where abundance of pure air out of doors in part counterbalances the evil. It was not, however, the fault of Darby and Joan that their house was unwholesome and that the rent was high.

Neither was it their fault that milk was nowhere procurable for the ailing little ones—so much butter was made for the London market, and it was more profitable to fatten pigs with the butter-milk than to sell it to the cottagers. Neither the absence of proper nourishment for his young children, nor the ill-built house, nor the high rent, could have been called the fault of Darby; he maintained always that it was not his fault either, but his great misfortune, that he could never contrive to lay by a shilling or two in those years when so many were dependent upon him for food and clothes and shoe-leather, and none of the family but himself able to earn anything, since his wife was entirely occupied at home.

He would have contrived it, perhaps, could he have had any certainty that his earnings would have benefited himself; hard as the pinch might have been, he, and many like him, would have laid by towards the time of old age, had there been any hope of their hardly-spared savings being allowed to mount up till that time should come. But all knew this would never be the case; all

knew that many a rough bit of road would have to be traversed before the last steep climb was reached, and that on that rough road no helping hand would be held out to them so long as a shilling of their own remained unspent. They would not be laying by for old age, but for temporary sickness, temporary loss of work, times when the parish was bound to help if they could not help themselves; laying by to lower the poor-rate, to help the squire and parson, not themselves. Even our Darby, a good man and true, did not feel bound to pinch his wife and children for that end. He did what he could however. He paid into a benefit club, and many a time in the course of his long life his club kept the wolf from the door, and the eight shillings a-week granted in return for his monthly half-crown kept him from the parish.

The first Monday in May was a merry day in the village. There was a band playing in the street, a dinner at The Woolpack Inn, and a booth or two set up, at which trifles of all sorts, from gingerbread to artificial flowers, were procurable. The children thought it a fine sight to see their father walk in procession with the other men, and this Joan of ours knew that her Darby would come home to her sober, which was more than every wife in the village could feel sure of. By-and-by, however, towards the end of their long life, this May Monday became an anxious time, for the club had a disagreeable trick of getting rid, upon that occasion, of members who threatened to be burdensome, or who had already too often been receiving benefit; and Darby had taxed its patience sorely, though hardly beyond the amount to which his steady payments entitled him. Sttll when a member was turned out it was done by unanimous consent, and this poor fellow was much liked and well

thought of, so that though club-day grew to be an anxious time, no harm came of it, and after Darby had become quite past work he was even superannuated upon the customary two shillings a-week. So long as Joan had strength left to support herself, this pittance contented them—this rather than the alternative they were driven to to-day.

There was a noisy group gathered about the entrance of one of the Elm-tree Cottages as our old couple passed. The man Puxty lived here, or rather his wife's mother did, for the Puxtys seldom had a home of their own. When the man was out of work the whole family trooped contentedly into the workhouse, to come out again when he found employment. They had done this during the past winter, and in the spring went to live with the angry-faced, loud-tongued woman now standing in the midst of the group at her own door, and who, angry-looking and loud-voiced though she was, never refused to receive her daughter and the tribe of children, nor even her son-in-law, perhaps setting off the enjoyment of scolding him against the slight inconvenience of finding house-room for one more person in the wretched tenement crammed to overflowing already. She had a room to give them, and she gave it readily. A room! The Puxty family numbered seven souls in all, counting the baby.

For a wonder, this shiftless set were in the act of moving to a cottage of their own. They did this now and then when wishing to appear extra respectable in the eyes of some new employer, but as they were never known to pay the rent after the first week, it always ended in their trooping back to Mrs. Puxty's mother or to the workhouse, as the case might be. Oddly enough, the man worked well when he did work, and could command

fair wages. But where was the good of saving on them! So long as he could buy beer and tobacco, and the wife and children had enough to eat, what else signified? When hard pinched, the House was always open to any one whom drunken habits and reckless waste had made a pauper of. That was Puxty's view of the case.

"No home," he said: "well, if I 'ain't got a home there's a fine big house waiting for me and mine. What's rates for if a poor man and his family can't be took in when times is bad?"

Puxty had no shame in it: Puxty would not so much as have understood the dumb pain in the heart of the old woman passing the cottage to which her Darby had first brought home his wife.

A little farther still. Here, amidst these fields and pastures through which the old couple were walking now, the man's work had lain while the children were small and claimed most of their mother's time, though she too might have been seen afield whenever that was possible. Every nook and corner of these pastures had been familiar to him once. How often had he followed the plough through the stiff clay of the low fields, or tended the sheep upon the meadow land above, from which one could look across at the workhouse, standing grim and silent by the dusty road! He had never looked that way without framing the wish that those dismal doors might never open for him or his; never seen the sunlight flashing on the row of upper windows visible above the surrounding wall, without an uneasy thought of how slight a barrier stood between him and the fate he dreaded. Of the three blessings that the man at work upon the door had named, but one had fallen to Darby's lot. A good wife—Heaven knows he had that; but though fairly

strong and able for a fair day's work, sickness had laid him low already once or twice; and for constant work, why that depended as much or more upon a man's health than upon anything else.

Then came a gleam of brighter sunshine, and a time, a few brief years, when the dread of being thrown on the parish lessened. That was a pleasant time, when the children began to grow up and even to earn a trifle. That was his boy, bird-keeping there on the hill-side. Did he see it all with those dim eyes of his, as he and the old wife turned into one of the larger meadows and went past the sheepfold, where lambs were bleating to-day as they did years ago? Was he thinking of the days when he and his Joan had struggled bravely together through the week, and walked in these very fields each Sunday, and when life had not been without its simple pleasures—a merrymaking in the village now and then, the school-feast for the children, pleasant summer evening strolls when work was done?

He may have been thinking of these times. There was a saddened chastened look on the half-childish face, as though something—he hardly knew or could exactly remember what—was wrong somewhere, a look half-wistful half-troubled that his face had taken to wearing of late years; but now, as had been the case at the farm a little way back, it was a trifle of to-day that seemed to vex and disturb him more than any grief of his own.

"They 'ain't shifted these here hurdles," he said; "they had ought to be shifted every day; 'twas so in my time." As he spoke, he began with shaking hands to try and shift the hurdles himself.

"It's for master," he panted; "I worked for him once —for the old master leastwise, this here be the young

man—a good master he were; wages was but twelve shilling then—twelve or maybe fourteen—they've risen now-a-days—folk 'ain't no need to complain now-a-days—wages is high, and rates is high—and we be going into the House—but I'll shift these here first. I tell you they had ought to be shifted every day!" He shook off impatiently the faithful touch upon his shoulder.

A worse fit of coughing than usual was the sole result of his exertions. He had no strength left to move a hurdle now upon land on which, or in the immediate neighbourhood of which—for frequent illness and consequent loss of work had obliged him to change masters frequently—he had worked for over forty years.

Shaken by the cough, and wiping the water from his eyes, he obeyed once more the woman's silent signal to proceed, for she was silent still. As they passed the sheepfold and went on skirting the hedge by a well-worn track, trodden week after week by the inhabitants of the hamlet, so that not even purblind old age could miss it for a moment, she may have been recalling the time when sickness attacked the children, so that three of them were carried one after another along this path her feet were treading now, the path leading to the churchyard. It was not the fault of the parents in the place if, when an epidemic broke out, the least healthy were the first to fall victims; nor surely was it the fault of Darby if with the few savings he had ventured to lay by, all gone during the time of sickness, he held out a faltering hand for parish relief, and the third little one lost to him had a pauper's funeral.

They say sorrow is depressing to the vital energies; perhaps that accounted for what was certainly the fact—that neither husband nor wife was ever quite the same

again as they had been before that time of trouble. It may be even that the sorrow of the poor is in some subtle way the heavier for that strange element of relief in it—relief that in laying even their dearest in the quiet earth, they lay down with them a burden as well as a regret. Broken in health and spirits alike, still further depressed by the consciousness that the independence in which they had taken such an honest pride was over now—for had they not been upon the parish at last?—the two toiled on together, mourning together over the little graves, as they had rejoiced together over each new comer to the cradle in the Elm-tree Cottage. Unencumbered by tender cares for the girl and boys that had been the youngest of her flock, of which but two now remained, the woman worked beyond her strength; so that, although her husband was perforce idle now and then, the illness that carried off the children having laid a stronger hold upon him than upon his wife, they contrived to pay up his club money, and to keep for the most part off the parish. He should not have known what to do without his missus, Darby said, in those days; he "shouldn't have had no hold at all on life, seemingly, but for her; she kept up his heart wonderful. She always had been a good plucked one, his missus had."

When, a year or two after, their one remaining son, whose wages were just beginning to be a real assistance to his parents, enlisted in a drunken frolic, if Joan did not say that her hold on life would have been lost altogether but for Darby, the same to the toil-worn woman that he had been to the young lass at the Corner Farm, or the happy mother in the Elm-tree Cottages, she probably felt it none the less as she wrung her hands and

bowed her head before this last blow. The lad had been a good lad always, seldom led into evil ways, and for just this once that he had been "overtaken" on a market-day, it did seem hard to lose him. If it was the law to enlist tipsy boys, why the law was a wicked one, sobbed the mother. They had not so much as heard of him since. He had been shot "out there, where there was fighting," she maintained. Where it was she did not know, but supposed with the French somewhere or other; if he had been living they would have heard of him—a good lad to his mother always.

This trial was more bitter than the loss of the little ones whose graves might be seen from the church-path through the meadow. The little ones had died in the mother's arms. Whether she gave more than a passing thought to them to-day may be doubted; the thoughts of the poor are so occupied with the present that presses so heavily upon them, that with whatever bitterness the memory of the past may come over them from time to time, they seldom appear to dwell upon it in any lengthy retrospect. For the future, many must have noticed how the poor habitually look farther forward than to any earthly goal, how daily, hourly, they look to heaven. "I have five lads," a woman said once; "and there ain't but one of 'em as has won home yet; *he* be safe at anyhow."

Before the aged couple reached the gate at the corner of the large field, they were overtaken by two men, whose tattered dress, and reckless disreputable air pronounced them to be tramps and vagrants. Neither of them gave the idea that their lot weighed heavily upon their spirits; one had a short black pipe in his mouth, the other whistled as he went: both appeared surprisingly cheer-

ful and light-hearted. These men accosted our wayfarers, and asked to be directed to the Union.

It was nigh at hand, the woman answered; the gate over yonder opened upon the road; that reached, they would see the workhouse right before them.

"Shouldn't wonder if you was bound there too," remarked the man with the pipe; "you don't seem fit for any other place, not you nor the old gentleman neither."

"What better place would you have?" said his companion, with a careless laugh; "what better would you have than them big houses as is open to the likes of us all through the land? They're different to be sure—the skilly ain't what it might be in one or two, or the master's over particular—but if a chap works it well he can mostly pick and choose, he can. I know the inside of a precious lot of 'em, I do, though I never was just hereabouts before. What are they for, them big houses, but for the likes of us, old gentleman?" He gave the old man a clap upon the shoulder that made the old frame totter, and with an impudent nod to the woman strode after his friend, who had already gone on ahead.

There was a glow of colour on the faded cheek of Joan, and Darby suddenly held himself more erect and walked for a few yards with a braver step than he had done hitherto.

"The likes of them!" he said, glancing uneasily at the good-wife by his side.

They had been respectable all their lives, and now poverty had brought them to the same level as "the likes of them." That was the hardship of it. The one daughter left to them had indeed come home from service to live with the old people, and would fain have been the support of their old age, but she came home in bad

health; they survived the last of their children. The two had been long years alone together since that day, faring as best they could, working while strength was left to work, till the struggle came to an end at last.

Out upon the long stretch of white and dusty road, where the figures of the tramps were visible far ahead of them, where the windows of the workhouse seemed to flash a mocking welcome as the sun's rays caught them, the woman plodded along silent still, watchful still over the uncertain steps of her feebler companion, still touching him from time to time upon the arm.

They had seen it before them all their lives, and they were here at last. The prison-like door in the high wall was closely shut. The woman raised her hand to touch the bell, and, as its peal echoed through the building, turned her dim eyes upon her husband.

"We 'ain't been apart not a day since we first went to church together," she said.

A look of intelligence, as though he only now clearly remembered what it was that had troubled him for so long, crossed the features of the old man.

"We 'ain't been a day apart for nigh upon fifty years," he answered.

The old hands met each other and joined in a long clasp. Then the door opened, Darby and Joan passed through, and it closed again behind them.

They will be allowed to see each other now and then.

THE END.

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